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Voices

J. E. BUCKROSE

VOICES

THE WOODEN

"We feel that we have a somewhat u
work before us, and we are not disapp
absolutely clear and direct manner the s
heart and soul is revealed with a glow an
insight and relentlessness, which arrest
command admiration."—*Bookman.*

"The work of a new writer of excep
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Brontë."—*Manchester Courier.*

"THE WOLF."

"We commend without stint the hun
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chapter in this excellent novel. Such
characters as we meet here, so finished,
touched, are almost worthy of Jane Austen
Pall Ma

"THE TOLL BAR

"To say 'The Toll Bar' is a strikingly
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VOICES

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE

Author of
"The Wood End," "The Toll Bar,"
"The Wolf,"
etc.

London: HUTCHINSON & CO.
Paternoster Row 1908

VOICES

CHAPTER I

THERE was an odd stillness about the yard of East Fallows: odd, that is, for a farm upon a working day. Nothing at all could be heard save the steady "Coo-coo" of the pigeons on the granary roof and the squeak of the grindstone just at the foot of the steps.

The granary itself was quite empty of corn, because the Moors only rented the house. All the land up to the very yard paling was let to Jane Burdock, who farmed it with her own pleasant acres. Even the grindstone would have stood still and useless but for the fact that she was over for the afternoon, and could not bear to see Mr. Moor feebly lopping at the garden hedge with a knife that wanted sharpening; so she stood there, bending to her work, a huge figure of a woman, with a voice like a man and a hat like an inverted corn basket.

Ten little steep steps led to the granary door, which was closed: and inside the long, low place, stretching all across the disused stables, there was a sort of mellow darkness that showed the sun was shining outside.

One tile had been torn off the roof by an autumn gale,

and through it a clear vivid shaft of sunlight fell straight down upon the dusty floor.

Sounds came from a distant dark corner.

"There's Aunt Burdock down there; go and ask her for some of her marshmallow drops, then we'll have a wedding and ask all the pretence people. They're so light and white, just like fairies' bride-cakes. Go on, Nellie."

"I won't. She called me a greedy little pig last time. You ask her," said Nellie.

"Oh, she wouldn't give *me* any," answered the elder of the two girls.

"Why not?" asked Nellie.

Esther came out of the corner, standing, with her dark face and dark hair, like a part of the warm shadows about her.

"Why?" she asked, with an odd irony in her tone for a child of eleven to have. "Why, because nobody does give me things like they do you. I've got to get everything by—by getting."

She couldn't express it properly, but there the thought was—she'd got to get everything, nothing came to her of itself.

"I would go, only I daren't," said Nellie.

"Are you frighteneder of Aunt Burdock than you are of me?" demanded Esther. "Then I'll do the old witch at you."

"Oh, don't—don't!" shrieked Nellie.

But Esther began to creep slowly towards the shaft of light, bending her shoulders and flinging black masses of hair about her face. Her thin, tense fingers struck out

like claws from the long, straight strands between which the pointed features seemed suddenly old. She drew together her heavily marked brows, and her eyes gleamed out with a queer magnetic force.

A moment she stood so under the stray shaft of sunlight, painted on the dark with the red lights in her black hair and the yellow gleaming in her eyes, like a picture of those forces which men do not understand.

Then the door was flung open and Esther was a little girl again, with a righteously indignant aunt before her.

"Now then, what are you up to now?" said Miss Burdock. "Nellie, why are you crying?"

Nellie shut her mouth very tight; she could no more have told Aunt Burdock about their talks, and the pretence people, and the old witch, than she could have flown.

"If you don't tell me what it's all about," remarked Aunt Burdock, who believed in the Spartan ways of the early Victorian training, "I'll give you something to cry for, Nellie. Your mother spoils you both until you don't know what's the matter with you. Now, out with it!"

She towered above the two children, her great voice booming through the empty place, and dominated them as she did everybody else. They took each other by the hand and stood timidly before her.

"I—I did the old witch—to make Nellie ask you for some goodies," said Esther at last. The answer was drawn out of her; she *had* to give it.

"Do the witch now," commanded Miss Burdock, going by instinct to the worst punishment she could have devised. "Do it again for me to see."

VOICES

"I—I can't," panted Esther.

"You must," answered Miss Burdock. "Do you hear? You must!"

Esther gave a look into her aunt's face, and saw so much of herself there that she knew the uselessness of protest.

"There, then!" she flung out, putting herself into the old attitude, her eyes shining with rage. "I wish I was a real witch; I'd turn you into an old fat pig."

But Miss Burdock was startled even to the point of not noticing such irreverence.

"Goodness, child," she exclaimed, "don't you ever do that again. Why, a hundred years ago you'd have been burnt for a witch, sure as eggs is eggs! Oh, it all comes of the way you've been brought up—your mother spoiling you and your father sneering at everything. Do you say your prayers night and morning?"

"Yes," answered Esther, "I do; but I'm like father—I don't think there's much good in it. He was telling mother yesterday that if she'd got all she prayed for she wouldn't be married to a poor man that has to send his boy to Lowport Grammar School instead of Winchester. He doesn't think God's taking any notice of her at all. I'm the same. I asked God to make me pretty and fair, with pink cheeks like Nellie, and here I am—brown, just brown and nothing else; and everybody brings her the dolls and chocolates and says, 'What a sweet little girl your youngest child is, Mrs. Moor!'"

"That's because she is the youngest," replied Miss Burdock. "I expect she is the best too—she believes in her prayers."

VOICES

Esther looked very hard at her aunt with those queer yellow eyes.

"P'raps I should if people gave me the chocolates and things," she said at last. "Nellie thinks everything's true. She thinks there are four angels round our big old bed every night because nurse told her a piece of poetry about it."

"There are, though," said Nellie eagerly. "I woke up in the night, and there was one at each bedpost—all white and shadowy. It was nice; it made you feel so safe. But I was little then—only six."

"You're only eight now," said Esther, "or you'd know that angels don't have red roses and green leaves on them. Why, it was the chintz bed curtains you saw in the dark, and the window was open wide so that they shook a bit."

"I *want* to think it was angels," said Nellie, almost with tears.

"I only wish," said Miss Burdock solemnly, "that you had Nellie's simplicity. I'm more than eleven, and yet I believe in the angels."

"Oh, of course," said Esther. "But, you see, you're a local preacher, Aunt Burdock; you've got to believe in everything. But father says he wants us to choose our own form of worship when we grow up, and he doesn't think preaching and cattle dealing go together. Why not? It's funny how you do men's things—preaching and cattle dealing and farming."

"I expect it's because you're so big," added Nellie, looking up at her aunt with awed blue eyes. "You

couldn't stop at home and just be a mother like our mother, because there wouldn't be any gentleman big enough for you to marry, would there? Unless the King William in Lowport market-place came alive again!"

"Well, he won't do that," answered Aunt Burdock, rather tartly. "Come down and see if we can find those sweets. But don't you frighten Nellie again, Esther; it's cowardly, and you're not a coward generally. Will you promise me not to do it again?"

After a few moments' pause Esther replied—

"Very well, I promise."

"But I'm afraid, Esther, you don't always say what you mean," remarked Miss Burdock. "Is this a promise to be kept?"

Esther's sallow face turned a painful red.

"I don't tell those kind of stories," she said.

"All stories are as bad as each other," said Aunt Burdock severely.

Esther made no reply, but went down the steps whispering to herself—

"Mother knows they're not—mother knows the difference between wicked stories and just making up stories. I *am* glad I've got mother."

"Well, Jane," said Mr. Moor over the hedge as they went past, "got the knife sharpened? I think I won't do any more pruning this afternoon; it is nearly teatime,"

Miss Burdock made no reply, but started to trim the hedge, while her brother-in-law smoked on a bench beneath the apple tree. When she had finished she sat down beside him.

VOICES

"You're not the first man that three hundred a year's been the ruin of," she said. "If you'd only had to work or starve——"

"I should have gone to the union; they are very careful of the workhouse cuisine nowadays," smiled Mr. Moor.

"No, you'd have mended old teapots like you do now, only you'd have been paid for it," said Miss Burdock. "I've brought a china bowl with me to-day that you might mend when you are at it, if you will. You'd have been as happy as a king tramping round the country with your bag and your rivets and your plaster of Paris; you were meant for that."

"My father thought I was meant for the Bar," said Mr. Moor, with a slight edge to his tone.

"Well, he was wrong, you see," said Miss Burdock, rising as Mrs. Moor appeared at the garden gate.

"Odd," mused Mr. Moor, "that those two can be sisters. Agnes was such a pretty girl, or else——"

He too rose, sighed, put his hands in his pockets, and sauntered down the path.

"Tired, Jim?" said Mrs. Moor as he came in. "You weren't brought up to outdoor work, were you? That's why it tires you so. Now, children, be off to your lessons, or you won't be first in your class to-morrow morning."

"Really, Agnes," said Mr. Moor, yawning, "you are always urging those children on; you're quite upset if Ned goes down in his form. What's the use?"

Mrs. Moor's pretty brown eyes shone and her face flushed. She had a vitality that nothing could deaden.

"I want them to have everything you could have given them if you'd married a rich woman and not hampered yourself with a penniless wife at the start," she retorted. "I want them to be just as clever as their cousins. I won't have them left behind just because you married me."

"Oh, it wasn't that," said Moor. "I wouldn't fight against luck if I were you—it isn't worth while. I've bad luck—always have had—always shall have. My father dies and leaves me three hundred a year, the amount of my allowance, in trust for my children. Your father dies without a penny. Your grandfather dies, and leaves all he has to your sister Jane. You can't stand up against luck. Has the paper come yet?"

"It's in your room," said Mrs. Moor, rather tremulous after her unusual outburst.

"Why are you so upset?" asked Miss Burdock after Moor had gone. "Has anything happened?"

"No," said Mrs. Moor, "nothing has happened; only Ned and Charlie are so like their father. They can't work steadily; they'll never get a scholarship and go to Cambridge, as I hoped they would. I've just had their report."

"They're good lads," said Miss Burdock.

"Yes, yes," cried Mrs. Moor, "I know they are; but I did want them to be great successes. Now there's only Esther; she's clever enough, anyway."

"And Nellie's pretty enough," added Miss Burdock.

Mrs. Moor got up and walked to the window, where she stood without speaking.

"They'd *got* to have some of their father in them," said Miss Burdock at last.

Mrs. Moor came back to the table. "Well, I believe Esther will do something great if she gets a chance."

"You believe such lots of things," laughed Miss Burdock, not at all unkindly. "You're like Nellie in that—you *want* to believe."

"The bother is when I can't," said Mrs. Moor, with a pleasant little gleaming reflection of her sister's shrewdness.

"Oh, you're no fool," said Miss Burdock, "only anyone you care for throws dust in your eyes. Now I can see plainly, liking or no liking."

Mrs. Moor looked down, then looked up.

"I am glad I can't," she said defiantly.

"All the same, I should centre your hopes on Nellie rather than on Esther," advised Miss Burdock. "The woman who rises out of her natural sphere and gets the big prizes must be pretty or fascinating. Now, Esther won't be either, poor little lass."

"She'll *do* something," said Mrs. Moor.

CHAPTER II

BUT Esther had arrived at the age of twenty-five without doing anything—anything, that is, to count. She went in for examinations and failed; she learned shorthand and typewriting in order to become a clerk in a London office, and her health broke down; now she was secretary to a Mr. Lavington, an invalided Cambridge tutor who lived at Shelton because of the sea air.

The high road from the Moors' house to Shelton lay along the edge of the sea, very straight and windy, with no turnings and few houses by the way. Far off, on one side of the road, stood a barrow in the midst of a pasture field. It was a landmark in that flat country, with a single sparse tree at the top of it, bent double by the strong north-easter.

Every day, going and coming, Esther saw the barrow with its rounded grass-grown sides and the storm-beaten tree at the summit. Sometimes, when she stayed dinner with her friends the Astleys in Shelton and came back late, the moon would be behind it, wild clouds scudding before the wind, and a black dense shadow on the field.

It was on a night like that, wild and cold, apt to thrill young folks to something beyond tame food and drink

and sleep at the end of day, that Esther first thought how grand it would be to stand there with the gaunt tree and the moonlight behind her and a crowd of people on the shadowed field below.

She could make them feel—what could she make them feel ?

Then the sudden thought quite passed away as Stephen Astley spoke to her.

"Do you think Nellie will be in bed when you get home ? " he said.

Esther turned round upon him with a mixture of scorn and impatience. "You'd better come in and see," she said quickly. " Perhaps Nellie may be up still ; then you'll be rewarded for your long walk with me."

" Oh, Miss Moor, I didn't mean that," exclaimed Stephen. " I'm so grateful to you for cheering my sister Mary. It is dull for her, just we two living alone, and her health being so bad."

" Yes," said Esther, " I see. You like me because I'm useful. But Nellie never goes to see Mary because they don't hit it off together, and you like her. Now, what do you like her for ? "

" I—I don't know," stammered Stephen. He objected to personal discussions of all things, and preferred, more or less, to know what people were going to say before they said it. With Esther Moor you never knew.

" Should I tell you what you like her for ? " asked Esther.

Stephen straightened himself.

" It's enough that I do," he said formally, flushing through his fine, pale skin.

"I'll tell you," insisted Esther. "You like her because she's pretty and taking and sweet—because she's herself—she doesn't have to *do* things to make people like her."

"No. What a glorious moon!" responded Astley. After that he walked by her in silence, his tall, spare figure outlined darkly against the moonlight sky, until they turned the corner and came in sight of East Fallows Farm.

Lights shone in the lower windows of the house, and there was a little hum of quiet talk when Esther walked into the sitting-room.

"Here's Mr. Astley," she said. Then she turned round to him in the dim hall outside. "Nellie's up still," she laughed, her yellow eyes gleaming and flashing under her black brows. He thought again what a very odd-looking girl she was.

"I'm glad to hear Miss Nellie is visible," he said, even more formally than usual, to hide his embarrassment. "Hallo, Ned!"

Ned, who was now in the Astleys' office in Lowport, gave a pleasant reply, but rather a distant one; for Stephen Astley surrounded himself with an atmosphere of respect that kept men of his own age apart from him. His careful upbringing in the stiff old Lowport house, where father and grandfather had lived before him, had caged a natural impulsiveness, so that those who tried to come near him always felt the bars. He was the old type of merchant trying to adapt himself to a modern century with a visible effort, and the word "Push" was no more vitally real to him than the battle-cry of a Choctaw Indian.

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"We had a letter from Charlie this morning," said Nellie. "He seems to like Melbourne better than that other place he was in, and he has got a pretty good berth."

"Only two lads, and one has to turn out of the country," said Mr. Moor, carefully fitting two bits of a broken china cup together. "Oddly managed universe. Just give me a light, Esther."

Esther held a match to his smouldering pipe, and in doing so passed her mother, who looked up with smiling brown eyes.

"Had a nice day, dear?"

Esther smiled back without speaking, but felt warmed, as she always had done since her babyhood, by that welcoming look. For it's a wonderful thing to be sure always of a welcoming face when the latch clicks to the opening of the door; only the lonely ones ever learn quite how wonderful.

Nellie brought out a syphon of soda and a whisky decanter and placed them on the table with a plate of Queen cakes.

"Those are Nellie's make," remarked Mrs. Moor.

So Stephen did violence to his feelings after a good dinner by eating three of them, and went away down the Shelton road feeling as if he had eaten too much ambrosia. He pictured such cakes on his own tea-table, and Nellie! He broke off—the vision was almost too splendid. But a sharp remembrance of his sister Mary struck through it. What on earth was to be done with Mary?

The moonlit night at Fallows Farm gave place to a wet

morning, and Esther fought along the coast road against the wind in her rough tweed coat with the sort of exultation she always felt in defying wind and weather. Her eyes shone brighter than ever, and her damp hair was tossed and wild when she got to Shelton.

The little seaside place was quiet enough now that the summer visitors had gone away, for all the business men living there took the early train to Lowport, returning at six o'clock in the evening. The long, plain street was grey with mist, and the dull sound of the sea swept up and down it as Esther rang the bell at Mr. Lavington's house.

"Well," he said as she came in, "you look more like a witch than ever this morning, Miss Esther; you only want a broomstick and a moonlit sky."

Esther frowned.

"I do wish you wouldn't say things like that, Mr. Lavington. Do you think I like being different to other people?"

"I like it," said Lavington, his thin, oldish face puckering into a caricature of its usual cynical amusement. "I would not be made by the stock pattern for anything—even success. I wish——" He made a long pause. "Esther, if I were a young man, or a rich old one, I should ask you to marry me. But I've sunk every penny I possess in a life annuity, and I've got rheumatoid arthritis."

"Oh, I couldn't," cried Esther.

"Hush!" said Lavington. "I'm ordered to Egypt this winter, and I could have taken you. I think you'd almost have married me for that, you want a chance so

much. Well, let's get to work. I must do what I can before I go."

He stood by the window fluttering the leaves of a book.

"Is that the textbook you sent for?" asked Esther, trying to recover her composure.

"No," he said, "it is one written by a friend of mine at Masterby. I'm not sure it's quite sane, but I'll dictate a letter of thanks for it. Queer ideas the chap's got about sounds that the human ear is not attuned to catch. Some people can't hear a bat's cry, you know—depends on the vibrations which produce sound on your particular ear-drum. By Jove, what a chance for a charlatan! The air may be full of voices, for all we know. Who's to dispute it if you say you can hear them? You may be the one in a hundred million whose ear is slightly differently formed; you'd hear voices—messages—an endless opportunity. One of these quack religions might be founded on it. Now for the letter: 'Dear Jones, many thanks——'"

The typewriter clicked under Esther's fingers, and the morning's work continued until it was time to put on her hat and coat and fight back again along the straight road, where the north-east gale stung her face with salt moisture.

She thought as she went of Lavington's words, and knew it was true enough that she would have married him. She wanted a chance so. Her mother's pride in her, and faith in her ability to *do* something, made her ready to take any chance rather than be a failure and a disappointment. She wanted dreadfully—with a longing that was not by any means all selfish—to more than fulfil her mother's brilliant hopes; and she fought along in the

storm until her heart beat high, and she felt just as certain as Mrs. Moor that she could do something if she could only find out where to begin.

But in a sudden lull of the wind, just about the time when she passed the barrow with the storm-bent tree, the hard fact came home to her that she had no chance. Her limitations seemed set round her then like visible walls.

Odd-looking, with no graces of manner, short of stature: how was it possible to make an adventuress out of that? An adventuress must have that about her which opens doors and touches men's hearts against their saner judgment—must be of the sort who attract gifts without seeming to want them; and Esther from a child always had to *get* what she received by her own efforts.

She felt baffled and very tired when she reached home, and the cunningly mended vegetable dish before her on the table struck the last note of stupid futility. This was how her father spent his life; no doubt she had inherited his intelligent incompetence, and she wondered what she would finally take to doing to fill up the long blank years.

"Ned's bringing Mr. Stallard out with him from Lowport to-night," said Mrs. Moor in a little flutter of excitement. "There is to be a meeting in the schoolroom, and Ned happened to see him at the club, so asked him to come in here afterwards. I shouldn't wonder if Ned were to speak as well."

"Ned always used to be conservative," laughed Nellie. "It's funny how he has changed since he got to know Mr. Stallard; he's a regular Socialist now."

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"Most young men are at one time or another," said Mr. Moor, rising from the table. "It is as natural to hope for the ideal commonwealth as it is to believe in the kingdom of God, and gives as big a chance for the knaves of the world to dupe the fools."

Esther paused, arrested in the act of rising. Something oddly familiar echoed through that speech, something she'd just been thinking of—why, a chance! And yet there seemed to be no connection——

She dismissed her disjointed thoughts and went to get out the best glass, on which Mr. Moor had not expended his talents, for the supper after the political meeting.

She herself cared nothing much about politics, so she did not go to the meeting. Mr. Moor made an elaborate point of taking no side whatever, and considering both absurdly in the wrong. He posed as the perfectly detached spectator of his country's doings, washing his hands of a universe which was really no concern of his; while Mrs. Moor was ardently conservative, with a most radical belief in chances being given to everybody to *do* something.

It was to this household that Paul Stallard came after addressing an audience composed chiefly of farm labourers in the Dunholme schoolroom. He was nursing the constituency in the hope of being returned at the next election, and being thus provided with a life more suited to his tastes than his present drudgery in an obscure newspaper office.

Mrs. Moor went to meet him as he entered the front door with Ned, flushed and proud, at his heels. He wore a

turned-down collar and an unusual tie to show the freedom of his opinions, and carried a crushable hat, which would take no harm from bad usage, to show that he was a Pilgrim of the World. He was the brother of all engaged in the sacred cause of freedom.

He had just said so at the schoolroom, and Ned's honest face glowed with impetuous sympathy, because that is one of the principles of the Ideal Commonwealth towards which young men strive if they are generous-hearted.

"I hope you had a good meeting," said Mrs. Moor in her nice pleasant voice.

For the space of a breath he paused, taking in the family group that he had joined—not perceptibly, of course, but with the merest gaze of his very open, candid-looking eyes, that seemed to give all out and gather nothing in.

"A very good meeting," he said quietly. "But even if it had not been I should have felt satisfied. I should have done my part towards helping on the right. You can't engineer for your neighbour. You've just got to do your part as a good citizen of the world and leave the rest. I can hold out my hand to my brother, but I've neither the power nor the will to make him take it. A man's noble independence of thought is the one gift that neither Parliament, nor landlord, nor grabbing capitalist can ever take from him. But I'd give my life if I could ensure every man's having a chance."

Mr. Moor was beyond in the dim passage leading to the kitchen, so Stallard did not see him; but there was no doubt about the response in the faces of the three women.

"It is awful," said Esther, with a deep breath, "not to have a chance."

The words spoke themselves. They seemed the epitome of all she had ever thought or felt. She again saw her limitations round her like visible walls, though they were very different to the barriers that Stallard was meaning.

"Ah!" he said quickly, "you see that too, Miss Moor—you understand; you belong to the Pilgrims of the World, who don't want to pile up riches or enlarge empires, but just to give every man a chance."

Esther leaned forward with a queer gleam in her yellow eyes, and her very spirit seemed to go out to Stallard in a rush of comprehension.

"I want a chance myself," she said.

Mrs. Moor flushed uncomfortably at this bold statement.

"Come, Esther," she said. "I'm sure Mr. Stallard will be hungry and disinclined for any more discussions to-night."

"How-do-you-do?" said Mr. Moor, coming forward. "Yes, my wife's right, you've done enough for the race for one evening. Time you looked after yourself. Even the Pilgrims did that."

"Oh, I don't set up for an anchorite," laughed Stallard, with his air of boyish candour, but his manner changed a little. He saw that his host, anyway, would have no sympathy with a Pilgrim of the World.

During supper he sat next to Nellie and admired, as most men did, her tender prettiness and the little air of reserve which was so absolutely unconscious. She simply waited to be sought as she always had done from baby-

hood. But Esther focussed his attention by a sort of effort that was quite unconscious too, but which ended by wearying him, in spite of the interest she aroused at first. She was an odd girl—clever, too, if she could only make anything out of it.

"Do you write at all?" he said when they sat in the sitting-room afterwards, and Mr. Moor had returned to Jane Burdock's broken bowl that was being mended.

"No," answered Esther, strangely vital, somehow, that night; the red gleams in her hair like firelight on shining coal, her eyes extraordinarily bright. "No, I couldn't write. I could *say* the things, I believe, but I couldn't write them. I've tried, but they go cold and flop when I try to put them down."

"I was thinking I might perhaps help you to a chance that way, my being on a paper——" suggested Stallard.

"You're very kind," said Esther. Then she paused, and suddenly broke out: "I don't know why I tell you all this, I never do tell people——"

Poor Esther, she thought she was saying something new, little knowing that it was the commonplace of every chorus girl and wheezy landlady with whom Stallard came in contact.

"I feel honoured by your confidence," he said gravely.

"Has Jane Burdock been in yet?" said Mr. Moor, appearing at the door with the bowl in his hand.

"No," said Mrs. Moor. "I think she must have driven straight home from the station; but she's preaching in Dunholme on Sunday night, and I daresay she'll fetch it

then." Mr. Moor disappeared again, and Mrs. Moor turned to the guest. "My sister is a local preacher, Mr. Stallard," she continued with rather an effort. "You'll probably hear of her before long. She farms her own land and is a very well-known person in this neighbourhood."

"I should like to hear her," said Stallard, thinking rapidly that it would be a good thing to identify himself with the labouring folk who worship at little country chapels. "I shall certainly come over from Lowport. Might I beg a cup of tea?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Moor in a little glow. Evidently he was taken with Esther. Of course, a really clever man would be taken with such a clever girl; the young men about Shelton simply were not able to appreciate her.

"You'll not care for Aunt Burdock's preaching much," said Ned uneasily, for he was rather ashamed of his aunt Burdock. "She puts on a broader accent than ever, though she is bad enough at all times."

"Everybody about here talked like that fifty years ago, even the county folk," said Nellie hastily. "I like to hear her preach to the village people; they all take in what she's saying much better than they would if she talked fine."

"Oh, she is a remarkable woman," agreed Esther. "And she has a peculiarly acute sense of hearing. I suppose it is with being out in the fields so much. She's grown a bit like the animals—can hear more than us, just as rats and mice and birds are supposed to do."

... in this neighbourhood, I fai
I thought, making out the air wa
we can't hear. But I'll bring it c
be interested to see it, Miss Moor.'

Esther started. How odd! Tw
upon a subject she had never spok
But that is an experience that happ
and it is as if some waves of though
way we do not understand.

"I should very much like to see
but she meant, unconsciously, that
like to see him.

The door had not closed upon him
voice came booming up the path.

"Here, Agnes, is my bowl ready?
in the trap outside."

She entered the room, and saw t
and the unwonted air of company.

"Who's been?"

"Mr. Paul Stallard," said Mrs. Mo
talking about

that we don't understand, and aren't meant to understand, and only get wrong if we meddle with. Why, the folks that burned witches were cruel, but they'd got a glimmer of the truth—they were protecting the race. Faith well used is the key to eternal life, but misused it's a worse weapon than any of us can dream about. Folks in old times were instinctively afraid. We've lost our instinct; we don't know anything about the power of faith."

"Um!" said Mrs. Moor, not interested. "Well, did you get the brown tweed after all, or the black and white?"

"Brown," said Miss Burdock. "Are you coming to chapel on Sunday night?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Moor, "and Mr. Stallard is coming too. He is anxious to hear you."

"Now, Agnes," laughed Miss Burdock, "you needn't try to take me in. You're all ashamed of my being a local preacher, and I'd rather you stopped at home on Sunday night as usual—and your Paul Stallard too."

Ned instantly responded to the tone in which his friend's name was spoken.

"Anyway, Stallard works hard to rouse the labourers to a sense of responsibility," he remarked.

"With his tongue," responded Miss Burdock. "That's the only part of him that Paul Stallard ever will work with, you bet; he'd have been just a fool banging a bladder and making jokes up at Masterby Hall a thousand years ago, for the sake of board and lodging without work."

sincere if he is nothing else."

CHAPTER III

ON Saturday night a week of wind and storm gave place to a hushed quiet. Those within East Fallows Farm could hear—if they were alone and silent—the crack of a falling twig, or the distant swish, swish, of indrawing waves beneath the cliff. The gale had swept upwards to that pleasant region beyond the grey sky where the Orchards of Paradise were in flower, and the shaken snow petals fell thickly upon the long road which led from Dunholme to Shelton until it looked like a pathway for Christmas angels to walk upon, though this was only the end of November.

But Esther thought of no such visitors as angels when she looked out across the shining country on the Sunday afternoon, and the dull gold of the early sunset above the snow only reminded her that it was time for Stallard to be coming if he should venture on the long tramp from his Shelton lodgings in such weather. Esther wanted to see him again and to feel that sudden inrush of sympathy and comprehension which she had known when he talked to her after supper; and she glanced at the corner where they had sat, then at the family group round the big fire, until a sort of sick impatience seized her. She hated to wait; it was an instinct with her to go and get a thing or do

[illegible] lighted, b
clustered together, staring out int
ing. Each thrilled a little when s
approaching as if she too were g
the gate, so strong is the blessed
us all.

"There! It's Mr. Stallard; hir
ing," whispered Elsie, the kitchenr
Esther 'll have got a young man at

They opened the window cautiou
so as to get a plainer view.

"Keep your great head out of my
maid fiercely, "I can't see a thing.
book—she's hiding it under her cl
he, he!" And they giggled toget
faintly that wonderful old song wi
the Progress of the Generations th
expanse of time.

Then the door banged below an
again, not noticing the other man
along the white road

and the thought of the firelight on Nellie's face at the journey's end, all made the blood flow faster than usual in his veins. Business details and the domestic worries which fall to the lot of a man with a helpless housekeeper often clogged his brain a little, but to-day an avenue seemed to be swept straight through all that, and he could see love, very shining and beautiful, at the further side.

For it is a fact that Astley, a commonplace merchant who sat at a desk all day in a narrow High Street, really regarded love in the same way as those men of old did, to whom it was a religion. His overcoat was a strictly business overcoat, as they are made for solid merchants in the provinces, but it might just as well have been a coat of mail and he on his road to fight for his lady's glove—the man inside would not have had to be the least bit different. And Nellie's little air of reserve so lent itself to his vision of her that he could go on worshipping.

But nobody would have dreamed this who watched him carefully rub his feet, fold his gloves, and say "How-do-you-do" to Mrs. Moor.

Stallard glanced up as he entered with a look of annoyance which passed instantly, and Mrs. Moor wore her curiously youthful look of aroused vitality, intensified; while Nellie's eyes were wide and sweet, as if she had just listened to something beautiful.

Esther sat in the shadow, where nobody could guess what she was thinking, and Stallard himself was flushed a little with his walk and the fire and his effort to appear what these women expected him to be. To enchain three listeners so different, and to play on their emotions, gave

which her faint reserve di
her come as near to the unconscious
minds as Esther's appearance fought
were always wide open at Nellie's ap

But Esther thought Stallard saw pa
her own intelligence, and a great de
which had gathered around her heart
five years melted away that afternoon

After tea the girls went up to get re
at the Methodist Chapel, but when the
Esther discovered she had brought dow
and was obliged to go back again to fet

"Go on, Nellie, or you'll be late," she
in a minute."

The thought flashed across her tha
have her walk with Stallard quite alo
four going gaily along together; but
the turn of the stairs she saw it was
for her.

"Stallard thought he'd like to be in
got Miss Nellie

"Why, Esther," said Mrs. Moor, looking up, "how ill you look. Are you fit to go?"

"Yes," said Esther, walking out without another word. But deep down there was just this bit of comfort—that her mother always noticed and always cared.

Stallard and Nellie walked slowly, and the other couple trudged along quick and silent, so all four met just outside the chapel, just as Miss Burdock alighted from her cart.

"Oh, you've come, then," she shouted. "Well, go in with you! It'll do you no harm and it may do you good."

A tall and lean cobbler led them into the Pobsons' pew—the Pobsons were the only considerable farmers who attended the chapel—and Mrs. Pobson, with her son William, already occupied the further end. Esther was next to her.

"You've come to hear Miss Burdock preach, I expect," flustered Mrs. Pobson, very tightly clad in some sort of stuff that shone. "Mrs. Henry Walker's going to deliver the opening prayer. No use. Talks to the Lord same as I do to folks at the door when I've cheese-cakes burning in the oven. Thinks about her bonnet."

Certainly, Mrs. Henry Walker did adjust the bobbing dandelion fluffs in her headgear with a conscious hand as she stepped importantly up to the little balcony above a plush-covered table, while the prayer which followed was ponderous, but unconvincing. But when that was finished Jane Burdock came forward in the odd-shaped hat and plain jacket she always wore, towering over the other woman and almost blocking her from view. There is no hiding the fact that the first sight of Jane Burdock was

ridiculous, like an eighteenth-century caricature; but when she began to speak, after that little pause by which she gathered her hearers' attention, everything grew quite different. No one in that place could fail to believe for the moment that she was praying to Somebody who listened, and when she ceased the people felt impelled to wait on their knees for a second, quite quiet, as if the answer might be coming then. For Jane Burdock was a born orator, of the sort that triumphs over any impediment of voice or looks, and she could strike deep chords in every listener's heart, not because of what she said, but, in some odd way, because of what she was.

The chapel was less full than usual, and when her sermon started it bore rather unprofessionally on that fact, with special reference to those members of the flock who had wandered to a revivalist mission in the neighbouring villiage of Masterby.

"It's been a grand week at Masterby!" she said, "a splendid week, a glorious week. Folks have been lying round the cross with showers of blessing streaming down upon them. Praise the Lord!" Then all present groaned a perfunctory "Amen." "But," and she hit the cushion so that the dust flew, "I must say I hold more with a bit of a steady sprinkle every day poured out by them that know the dry places."

Then followed the application of her text, and the end of the sermon, but not until she had held and riveted her hearers' attention for three-quarters of an hour. Esther sat wondering. This did not seem to be Aunt Burdock

alone, but Aunt Burdock and something else. What was it ?

As she knelt, listening to the closing prayer, the answer to that question gradually grew clearer. The something was a gift which Aunt Burdock could only use when she had the chance. It lay dormant in her at other times.

Esther's mind groped for a sequence of ideas ; she almost saw and yet not quite.

A gift—dormant—what could that mean to her personally ? Then, in a sudden illumination she saw everything quite plainly. This same gift lay dormant in herself as well. She too could gain and keep the fixed attention of an audience if she had the chance.

Ah, that was the one thing always wanting—chance.

Why—the realization rushed over her like a flood—Why, she could do more than Aunt Burdock ; a thousand times more. She could enchain a multitude.

The little chapel swayed round her, and only by the strongest effort could she keep herself from fainting.

Slowly, after a while, things steadied. She could not preach in a Methodist Chapel, and what other chance was there ?

The exaltation passed, she felt old and tired ; and the speaker's words seemed to come from a long way off.

"Since last Sunday," Miss Burdock was saying, "a widow has died leaving three little lambs to the shepherding of God." She paused, and the congregation leaned back with an easy sense that they were not responsible, then. "But," she continued, her great voice booming out like a gunshot, "He wants sheep-dogs. The collec-

... Lord," said the c
thought themselves a little worth
was a good deal to get in Dunholme

"Let's have one more hymn,"
coming forward again. "I'll warra
chapel roof at Masterby, and we wo
ber eight hundred and three. Now

And they let it go, until Mrs. Pc
Esther, nearly burst the seams of that
something black and shiny.

"There," said Miss Burdock, when
that'll reach the courts of heaven as
songs from Masterby."

And all the congregation responded
with a fervent conviction that the Du
get there first.

Esther gazed up at the woman wh
little group of ignorant labouring folk
hand, able to sway them, if she chose
was a moment that might bear tremer

For the moment when

more, and a farmer who had to drive to Shelton Station shouted to ask Stallard and Astley if they wanted a lift: but he could not wait a moment.

"Oh, thanks," cried Stallard, hastily bidding the Moors good-bye; "I have to be in Lowport by the first train to-morrow morning, so I shall be thankful. Come on, Astley," from the step of the cart.

"I'm walking," said Astley shortly.

Stallard glanced back to where Astley stood with Nellie on the chapel steps; the light shone out into the snow, uniting those two in a stream of radiance, the girl's face pale with the sudden cold, the soft contour of her chin visible as she turned to speak. He felt suddenly tender over her, wanted to take her in out of the cold and comfort her, and took one step down from the farmer's cart. Then he realized what he was doing. It was no use: he must go on, leaving Nellie to another man's care, for the woman he married would have to be rich, while Nellie was a penniless girl set round with a delicate reserve that prevented any dream save that of marriage.

So he got into the cart again and went off through the snow with his familiar vision of success a little tarnished, for he could not have his cake and eat it, and the universe seemed out of joint.

Mrs. Pobson had been communing importantly with Mrs. Henry Walker of the dandelion fluffs, but she emerged now with William, clucking like a kind and distressful hen.

"Come, come," she said, taking Esther's arm, "you look half starved, my dear. Just run along with me and William, and he'll drive you home after you've

refuse her kindne
a child's flower—both being given
confidence in the receiver's pleasure.
even Astley himself, could no more h
they could have thrown their hymn-b
comely countenance.

Just as they were all moving away
like a flash, her horse restive with stan

"My husband says she could dri
harnessed," said Mrs. Pobson, in the l
repeats a shocking but palatable remar
a will. The dumb beasts know that a
can break a horse the men's beaten
she's sewing a silk seam. Funny neit
take after her. But it would be a mi
you did—you'd never get a husband."

"She does very well without," said

"No woman does," replied Mrs. Pob
son, who plodded rather dismally on
"Nor any man without a wife, eithe
ordained: and if you can't get th

a generous man. "Damn," he muttered under his breath as he thought how Astley had helped to eat it.

"What did you say?" asked Esther, trying to rouse herself from her dull and bitter thoughts, through which a vague expectation ran like a fiery thread, now seen, now hidden, but never near enough to grasp.

"Nothing," answered William, with his usual air of dragging the words out of himself by main force.

"William's going to his new farm next month," said Mrs. Pobson, panting with the fight against the snow, but determined to supply her son's deficiencies and exhibit him in the best light. "He's got five rooms furnished beautiful, with new things and what we could spare from home. And when he finds a wife he'll furnish the drawing-room. He'll have to keep a kitchen housekeeper till he gets married, but they're a great nuisance—always getting at the whisky and using eggs beyond all count, and he hates waste. I wish he could find a nice wife."

"They're plentiful enough," laughed Esther.

William cleared his throat.

"Not wives like you Moor girls," he said with an immense effort, "who know how to bake and clean, and make butter up. You've Miss Burdock to thank for that. Maybe she's taught you to judge cattle too?"

His blue eyes grew keen. It wasn't an idle pleasantry—he wanted to know how far Esther's farming capabilities went.

"Oh, yes," said Esther, "I can break a horse too, if I care to do it; I rather like that, it makes you feel——"

She broke off without saying what it made her feel, for

that fiery thread in her mind grew so very plain for the moment that she almost caught it. It had to do, then, with her will—that power of dominating——

"My word, the farmer'll be lucky that gets you," panted poor Mrs. Pobson, at the very end of her strength, but determined not to give in so long as she had breath to assist her silent son. "Won't he, William?"

"Oh, dunno," said William, greatly embarrassed by this leading question.

To the relief of all three, Mr. Pobson's round figure was seen in the open doorway, and his hearty voice came muffled through the thick-falling snow.

"Come in, come in," he shouted. "The kettle's boiling and there's cold ham on the table. Why, it's Miss Esther and Miss Nellie—now that's fine. We'll make a night of it, Mr. Astley, and I'll drive you into Shelton to-morrow morning. I shall have to go to the station with some samples of corn."

The door clanged; and it seemed with that sound as if everything cold or sad or ugly in the world were shut out. Such a roar of burning wood and coal came down the red-bricked passage from the kitchen, such a glimpse of glorious red light on dozens of dried hams and ghost-like bunches of herbs tied up in newspaper. Everything so absolutely what it pretended to be and nothing else that nobody real could fail to be at home there.

Even Stephen Astley, with his little formal manner and his decorous, well-cut clothes, seemed no more out of place than Mr. Pobson himself, for it was an atmosphere which tried sincerity as the fire tries gold. Shams immediately

looked vulgar, or, being too showy, made the Pobsons look homely and dull.

But so far as that went, all this party rang true. They pretended to nothing at all which they were not, and the splendid pink ham, which money can scarcely buy in such condition, looked as good in thin layers on the blue crockery as it really was. The pale salted butter was hard and clean tasting, something like the northern air; and the hot milk foaming up in one jug, the mulled ale in another, and the scent of coffee ready to come in, made a festival such as honest people loved in the days before the Bogie Borax was evolved.

"Your very good health, sir," said Mr. Pobson, nodding to Astley in the pleasant way which also belonged to times when men wanted good fellowship; then for a long minute his face disappeared behind the pewter tankard, coming forth jollier than ever.

Astley took coffee, but it had somehow, in that house, the same exhilarating quality as mulled ale; and after supper he helped to clear away the dishes into the back kitchen—it being Sunday and the girl not home yet—with the sense that he was young, the world before him, and marriage with Nellie a near and glorious possibility.

Nellie's cheeks were flushed to a deep rose-colour after battling with the snow, and her regret at Stallard's departure was not deep enough to damp her spirits, for she had a serene conviction, born of experience, that he would come back. In the meantime, it was of course right that somebody should be worshipping her, and Astley did very well. She liked him so much, and had such faith in him.

[illegible] while she slipped
firelit kitchen to see if their wraps we
put on again.

She stood for a moment by the flar
sounds of voices and laughter that cam
and to the jingle of crockery in the l
the girl was now washing up.

The thought struck her when she hea
voice that Nellie could not have slippe
somebody would at once have seen and
there was no bitterness in Esther's thou
however much of it there might be abou
world. Nellie never tried to take atte
things just were so.

She looked up suddenly to see W
down the brick passage as if he wer
of his own unwilling cattle by some
Indeed, it was Mrs. Pobson's meanin
ing of the mouth and quick nod in
the kitchen which had driven him fo
dismal contemplation of [illegible]

But when he caught sight of Esther, with the red light of the fire burnishing the red lights in her black hair, and the glow of her eyes in her shadowy dark face, he almost changed his mind. She was so hopelessly far from his preconceived ideal that he felt her to be almost uncanny. Then she broke a big coal and the fire burned so high that she stood in a full light, and the impression passed. After all, she was a capable housewife of a good stock, and his north-country shrewdness came to the rescue.

Still his natural silence deepened on him until he felt actually tongue-tied. He coughed, and made odd noises in his throat, but the words wouldn't come, and he gazed wildly at the fireplace in search of a topic to start on. Time was pressing. Somebody might come any minute. He might never have such a chance again.

Esther, unconscious, had turned again to the fire; but he wiped his brow with such a desperate gasp that she was forced to notice it, and turned with a startled:

"What's the matter, William?"

"I—I—have you an open range or a closed range in your kitchen?" he stammered.

"An open one," said Esther, greatly surprised.

"Like this?" gasped William. "Mine at my new farm's like this too."

"Yes?" said Esther, moving away towards the door.

In sheer desperation he seized her arm.

"Esther, will you—will you cook on my range? Do you think you could?"

"William, what on earth do you mean?" cried Esther, pulling her arm away.

He stuck his hands deep in his pockets.

"Will you marry me?" he said, standing square in front of her.

"Why—you wanted Nellie," she blurted out.

"Yes," he said doggedly, "but I want you now."

"Because you can't get Nellie?" she said with a queer laugh. "Well—never mind, I'll think it over. Will that do?"

At that moment the servant came in wide-eyed, with an armful of crockery, so it had to do; but Esther wondered how much the girl had heard.

William felt fairly secure of his lady because Esther was twenty-five and had had no previous offers, so he put his arm round her in the trap on the way home and tried to think how clever she was about a kitchen and how convenient it would be to have a wife able to break the young horses. He also thought she ought to be grateful for a good upstanding husband.

Nellie and Astley sat behind, and once Nellie's tie, warm from her neck, blew off and touched his cheek.

Oh, if it had been Nellie!

But he drew a long breath and kissed Esther under the black shadow of a tree, finding it not nearly so bad as he expected; so that he felt heartened to remark:

"Let's fix it up now and have done with it. Say 'yes,' there's a good lass. I shan't be able to get down to ask you again till Wednesday."

There was no doubt as to her ultimate reply in his tone, and Esther felt vaguely humiliated. A man ought to be on his knees this once if never again—but it was a sort

of chance. She would wait and think, before she gave it up.

"Then I'll tell you on Wednesday," she said, getting down from the trap.

The light from the door, as Mrs. Moor ran out to meet her, fell upon William's heavy features.

"*Could she?*" Esther thought.

In the second that followed she knew she could do anything for a chance—anything.

She *would* have a chance.

But groping dimly in her mind, she began to see it must be a bigger chance than this.

Housekeeper on a small farm without wages—without love?

No. She'd *get* something better than that if she had to rob the world for it.

CHAPTER IV

ESTHER slept as soon as her head touched the pillow, for she was very tired, but she awoke about one o'clock so fully that it seemed like morning. The blind was up because no one could see into an attic window surrounded by quiet fields, and the snow had ceased falling.

After a while she grew so restless that the bed seemed full of thorns, so she put a shawl round her and went to look out. The moon shone clearly now, and the whole country just covered with freshly fallen snow reflected waves and sheets of silver radiance—the world seemed more full of moonlight than Esther had ever known it.

She stood, not noticing the bitter cold, because she was almost grasping that fiery thread of thought at last.

She moved her chilled hand along the window-sill, and it struck the book which Stallard had given her, so she took it up and pressed it to her for company. She felt so very much alone, facing that moonlight night.

Her thoughts began to move extraordinarily fast, the fiery thread slipping in and out, in and out.

It seemed to her that moonlight brought forth the highest powers of the spirit as daylight does those of the body—her intelligence at every point was peculiarly alert.

And that fact also seemed to be part of the Great Chance that was looming near.

She rested on her hand without the faintest movement, listening to the silence. After some time she began to hear that strange ghost-like sound of passing feet which most imaginative people know who have waited tensely in a silence like that—it is as if the souls of all who had ever gone that way were walking past again. But of course it is nothing at all.

Still, though Esther knew quite well it was nothing, her thoughts turned naturally towards the theory expounded in the book she held. How easy to believe that there were sounds—voices—messages—which the ear was not attuned to catch.

How easy—listening on a still moonlit night like this—to fancy you did hear them.

She had hold of the fiery thread now, grasping it, so that it could not escape her again.

How easy to imagine it vividly enough to convince other people—to impose her concentrated will upon their flabby minds—above all, how easy to assert a fact which no one could prove to be impossible.

Her memory flew back to other men and women who had done this thing which appeared from the outside so tremendous.

Was it tremendous ? Was it not rather so simple that only genius got hold of the idea ? All that seemed to be required—looking back with this new inward vision—was the peculiar will power and dominating influence which she had inherited from Aunt Burdock.

Then the whole meaning of that moment in chapel burst upon her. This was what that realization of power had signified—she had got her chance at last.

She sank upon her knees in the cold little room, staring up still into the moonlit sky, but with no thought at all of prayer or of a personal God beyond. Mr. Moor's conception of a Creator who ought to forgive us anything—if He cared at all—for putting us into such an impossible world, was too well suited to Esther's temperament for it not to have become her creed also. The abstract Cause of Being ought to have given her a chance and could not in common justice blame her for taking it, even at His expense. This was her plain conviction.

She got into bed again, numb with cold, but noticing it as little as a hypnotized man will do a burning match; every power of mind and nerve was concentrated on one point, and her plans grew clear with extraordinary swiftness.

The vague sense that so many people have at times of dimly hearing noises which they know are not there would give her a splendid starting-point. To have odd sensations of which one is half ashamed, made the sign of a higher spiritual intelligence, would appeal to thousands of emotional people—and they are the people a new religion wants.

Every one who was conscious of a tendency to hear vague noises in the night would think they were on the eve of becoming a prophet. That was feasible enough.

Esther's dammed-up capabilities seemed equal to anything as she lay like a dead woman, so still and cold, on her little bed.

But now came the question of gain to herself—she must have money in some way—a chance means that in the twentieth century.

How was she to bring in the money ?

The dawn was breaking now, it crept raw and ugly over the tense grey-yellow face and blue lips, but still Esther was not conscious of being cold.

She must appeal to some universal want. How should she do it ?

The sun followed now, the whole white world was glorious and shining ; Esther was roused at last and moved a little, when a sharp pain struck through her, but even that only ministered to her obsession.

Pain. That had something to do with the chance.

Why, pain was universal! A man had only to stand up in Lowport market-place dressed like a red Indian, as one had done when Esther was a little girl, to have hundreds of poor folk crowding round to buy remedies for a shilling which were not worth a penny.

Human nature craves so for health that, like a drowning man, it is ready to grasp at any straw. Easy indeed to take advantage of pain.

But Esther promised herself she would do no harm at all. She would only try her plan on some neurotic person who could equally be made better by believing strongly in the curative properties of grass blades, or any other harmless thing.

She would tell such a person as that about the voice, and say she was bidden to heal them.

She would do no harm. But she must fulfil her mother's

ambitions and her own better than by spending her life between William Pobson's kitchen and dairy.

She'd always have to *get;* nothing came to her. It was just the same now as it had been long ago that sunny afternoon in the granary, and she was slipping past the time when a woman had a chance to get.

She would take this first and last chance to do something—to be really a success and not just an odd-looking girl who would soon creep away into unnoticed age.

But when she tried to make a start in her new career by dressing and going downstairs, the pains shooting all over her made rising an impossibility; and William Pobson languished in as much uncertainty as his very high opinion of himself permitted until nearly Christmas, before Esther was well enough to come down and give him his answer.

Stallard had been several times to the house during that period, in spite of his determination to keep away, and there is no doubt that his feeling for Nellie was the best form of love he had ever known.

"You're not clever, you know," he said to her one day.

"No," assented Nellie, thinking him rather rude.

"But you're like a sweet flowery garden, where a little wind of feeling stirs the flowers now and then to show the warm red earth beneath," he continued.

And Nellie thought how very frank and open he was—not having noticed how he often said little rude things that didn't matter to make a big compliment seem doubly real. In fact Nellie was beginning to see nothing in Stallard that was not fine. His squash Pilgrim-of-the-world hat

seemed to her a very badge and patent of nobility, and as she perused his speeches in the "Lowport Herald" with flushed cheeks and quick breathing, they seemed to bring the millennium next door.

During that week before Christmas when Esther came downstairs, Mrs. Pobson's niece was married to a doctor in Lowport, and Mrs. Moor came from the wedding earlier than Nellie, sitting down in her best jacket to tell Esther all about it.

"Mr. Stallard was best man—appears he is a great friend of the bridegroom's. He is going to bring Nellie home later on."

"How did the bride look, mother?" asked Esther.

Mrs. Moor turned a wistful mother eye on her eldest daughter.

"Oh, all right. She isn't much to look at, you know. It seems a wonder she has married so comfortably. Mrs. Pobson tells me he runs his motor-car. Funny how some girls seem to get chances when they have really nothing about them."

She sighed, still with that wistful wonder in her eyes that her Esther had not found a comfortable match; and the girl felt stung, as if her mother had humiliated her somehow. To think that she—who ought to be first—who ought to stand far above the half-educated farmer's daughters about there—should be looked on by her own mother with a wistful pity.

"William Pobson's coming to-night for his answer," she burst out, eager somehow to justify herself.

"What answer?" cried Mrs. Moor, her face lighting up.

"Mine," said Esther, "to his offer of marriage."

"Why, I thought at the wedding to-day he was after that girl of Walker's," said Mrs. Moor, "but I might have known he would have too much sense. A silly little giggling thing like that. Esther dear, I am glad. A good home for you when I'm gone, and some one to take care of you. I've often worried, wondering what you'd do when your father and I were taken."

"Hush," broke in Esther. "Oh, don't say any more, because I'm not going to accept him."

"Not—going—to—accept—him?" said Mrs. Moor, dropping the words slowly one by one. And by the depth of her astonishment Esther measured the shallowness of her hopes of another suitor coming forward.

"You weren't so surprised when Nellie refused him?" said Esther.

"No," said Mrs. Moor. "No, but, you see, there was Astley."

"And every other man who comes here, of course," said Esther.

"My dear," cried Mrs. Moor, "you mustn't think that is because you are not attractive too; it is because you're above the taste of these country fellows. If you were in London among the clever people, I know you'd be admired."

Esther got up and kissed her mother, a very rare occurrence with her, excepting at night and morning.

"I know you think every one ought to fall down before me," she said. "Now do take your best things off before they get messed with father's cement. He has been

mending Mrs. Walker's toby jug in here because of the light."

"Did he bring you some oranges? I asked him to get some in Shelton this morning," said Mrs. Moor.

"No. I daresay he forgot. He came home a good deal upset because he couldn't get any more rivets," answered Esther without impatience. They did not expect much of Mr. Moor.

But when she was alone again by the fire, the plan which had seemed so real and vivid the night she became ill, and which had grown so far-fetched and impossible since, suddenly turned more practicable and more solid than it had ever been.

She could not bear to be looked at with wistful pity. She would *do* something, as her mother had always foretold.

That same evening Stallard, William Pobson, and Ned Moor drove up in a cart to the front door, and Esther could hear from her place by the fire how they stamped about the frozen path to warm themselves, while their voices sounded very clear and strong in the frosty air. Then Ned and Pobson went round to the stable and Stallard came in unannounced.

"Ned told me to walk straight in, Miss Esther," he said, entering with a rush of biting air and standing up in the lamplight, flushed with the cold and the sort of vivid life that a frosty night like that puts into north-country folk. They thrive on it as the south country people do on the sun, gathering energy and colour from its keenness.

As the chance receded she saw with extraordinary clearness how splendid it was—she realized more than ever before, the tremendous possibilities which slumbered within her.

But love, when it is big enough, demands renunciation, and Esther's was of that kind, though it had not reached its full maturity; the very fact of never having frittered emotion away in little girlish affairs made her capable of a passion which would make everything else in the universe look little by the side of it.

To Esther, even her Chance began to look little after a while by the side of her feeling for Stallard, and her fiery egotism and ambition became almost unimportant.

But jealousy is the one thing which can grow big even by the side of real love, big enough to overshadow it—dwarf it—pervert it; so when Nellie came into the room suddenly, and Stallard turned with a sudden look on his face Esther could not mistake, she saw in a flash that it was the same now as it had been in the long years from babyhood, when Nellie had had everything without effort, while she got so little with all her striving. In that pause she hated—not Nellie, never that—but the world which she could now rob rejoicing. Nobody gave her anything—she'd *get*—she'd *get*——

After a while Stallard went away, tearing himself, with an effort visible enough to Esther, from Nellie's company; and then William Pobson had his opportunity to speak to his lady alone. He stood near the mantelpiece, with Esther still in her corner, much as Stallard had done, but

the fire was hotter now, his riding clothes gave off a little odour of scorching, and he kicked the fender with his riding boots, not from want of assurance inwardly, but because he found conversation difficult.

"Well," he said, "you've had plenty of time to think it over. I thought you might have told me what the answer was when you wrote and fixed to-night for me to come." He stuck his hands in his pockets and jingled his keys. "Well, I—I s'pose you—it's all right, isn't it? Eh, little woman?"

"What about the little Walker girl?" said Esther.

William chuckled—so she was jealous. He liked the sense of power that gave him.

"Oh, when the cat's away the mouse will play," he said, rather airily for him. Then he suddenly thought that was perhaps a rather unlucky shot. "I mean—that is—of course I'm not comparing you—I'm sure I don't know what made me say that."

"Never mind," said Esther easily. "It's no matter what you compare me to because I am not going to marry you."

"Not going to marry me?" gasped William. "Why, it's as good as settled. I've got a Japanned bedstead at old Martin's sale with pink hanging, and a work-table lined with green—you'll *have* to marry me."

"I'm very sorry, William," said Esther earnestly. "And I thought I could do it more pleasantly by word of mouth than by writing, or I would have let you know before. I should have managed to let you know anyway, only you took it so for granted I should be thankful to marry you."

William Pobson turned purple, he was quite justifiably in a rage.

"Well, so'd anybody," he cried. "You've never had a chance before and won't again. Good night."

"Stop," said Esther. "Don't let us part like this. I've behaved badly, but so have you now; let us cry quits."

Her hair was tumbled, and her face looked very thin and drawn between the heavy strands; there was something fiery, spiritual, almost uncanny, about her whole look after the excitement and fatigue of the day. Her physical weakness, somehow, made her mental energy only more apparent. Pobson stared at her with hard, angry eyes.

"What you say, and what you think, makes no difference to me now," he said slowly. "You can't move me. You couldn't if I stood here and saw you glaring and flashing at me for a hundred years. You're just a silly woman, and nothing more. I've done with you."

"Calling me a silly woman won't make me one, William, though I know you wish it would; but I quite see that I can't influence you. Good night."

As he went noisily away she sat down upon her chair and leaned back, very, very tired; too tired to think, or to do anything but remain there with vague ideas drifting to and fro across her mind.

But one idea gradually stood out from the others as she grew rested, took form and shape, became at last startlingly distinct.

She saw that there were people beyond her range of in-

fluence, and these must be kept out of her great scheme. She must only appeal to those with whom she had a reasonable prospect of success. Her theories must not be freely offered to the general public, but she herself would point out those to whom the Voice gave her a message. How was she to do it?

CHAPTER V

ON New Year's Eve there was to be a dance at the Shelton Assembly Rooms in aid of the Children's Hospital. It was an annual thing, and the Moors always went, driving back and forth in the open dog-cart, and carrying their shoes in a holland bag. Mrs. Moor had attended it when she was a girl, and she first met her husband there; so cynical people might have thought she would now want to keep away—but cynical people would always get wrong in any estimate of Mrs. Moor.

As a matter of fact she was keener now than she ever had been, and took up the pink tickets, which had stood to her all her simple life for a very symbol of gaiety, with a smile of pleasurable anticipation; then she looked down again at the accompanying circular and grew serious.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it says, 'Fancy Dress'! How silly, when it has been such a success all these years, to go and alter things. Did you know it was to be fancy dress, Nellie?"

"Yes," answered Nellie. "I did hear, but it went out of my head again."

"Well, I am surprised at that," remarked Mrs. Moor, gathering up her letters.

"Oh, Nellie's head has only room for her young men,"

chaffed Ned, very proud of his sister's conquests all the same.

"The question is, where are we going to get dresses from?" said Nellie, very pink. "I haven't a penny left—have you, Esther?—and I'm sure mother has nothing to spare."

"Aunt Burdock has some old gowns packed away that belonged to my grandmother," said Mrs. Moor. "Grandfather kept them till he died, and she has just gone on hoarding them."

"But they're only plain stuff gowns, like a farmer's wife would wear," said Nellie, wide-eyed and almost tearful with disappointment. "We can't go in those."

"Well, drive over and have a look at them," said Mrs. Moor, always hopeful. "You can go in woollen stuff to a fancy dress dance if it looks quaint enough. What do you say, Esther?"

Esther looked at her mother for a moment as if she were slowly coming back from somewhere a long way off.

"I didn't hear," she murmured, glancing from one to another.

"Esther's always wool-gathering too, in these days," said Ned, coming in in his overcoat to say good-bye before starting for Lowport. "She's worse than Nellie. But it isn't young men with her. I don't know what it is—perhaps she is going to write poetry."

Nellie went out to the door with Ned, and Esther was left alone with her mother.

"That's true, dear," said Mrs. Moor gently. "Only I have not liked to bother, or to seem to watch you. I knew

how you hated it. But do tell me if anything is troubling you that I can mend. I don't want to force your confidence, but I don't think I have ever failed you yet when you have come to me."

Esther looked steadily at her mother for a moment, then she said slowly:

"No, you've never failed me. And I think I am going to fulfil your hopes at last. You've always said I should do something—you've stuck to it, though I'm twenty-six nearly and have done nothing. Well, I'm going to *do* something. It's all in my mind, growing and clearing by itself, but I can't talk about it yet. Can you go on believing in me a bit longer?"

"Why, Esther, how queerly you talk. Of course I shall always believe in my clever girl—I couldn't help it. I've always been proud of you," exclaimed Mrs. Moor.

"So you have, mother," said Esther, her face rather wonderful just then, with its mixture of fire and defiance and tenderness. "Well, I'll try to give you cause to be proud of me."

Then Nellie came back and they went their different ways about the house. Esther took no settled duties in the sense that her sister and mother did, because she had been at Mr. Lavington's every morning until he went to Egypt, and employed in various other ways before that; so when she finished putting her room in order and dusting the ornaments she had time to sit down and think. The result of her meditation was a visit to the granary, where she set the door wide and looked keenly round the big silent place. There was no hint of sunshine in dim corners

now, and the broken tile had been mended, but she remembered how the light streamed down in a shaft upon the dusty floor that time—the last time—when she did "the old witch" to frighten Nellie. She went and stood on the spot, picturing how the light fell, and how it would make her stand out from the shadows. The effect must have been weird and striking; Aunt Burdock's startled face had proved that plainly enough.

She even remembered Aunt Burdock's voice of irritated contempt following on the start: "You'd have been burned for a witch."

She had brooded over these words for many bitter minutes before her looking-glass in childhood; now she was glad to recall them.

After a while she went in to her mother, who stood baking mince pies for the Christmas Eve supper with a sort of pleasant cheerfulness and bustle which fitted the occasion. Mrs. Moor could not have made the first batch of mince pies even after thirty years of housekeeping with the same commonplace serenity with which she filled lemon cheese cakes, for instance. She was so vitally and essentially young.

"Well, Esther, come to taste the mince-meat? It's better than last year's, I think. I got a new recipe from Mrs. Pobson."

"Why, mother," said Esther, "your old one was good enough for anything."

"Oh, I always like to learn something fresh," said Mrs. Moor, covering a pie. "These have a dash of orange juice in them."

"Mother, you're hundreds of years younger than me," said Esther, looking at her with sombre eyes.

"Rubbish," laughed Mrs. Moor. "All young folks feel old. Reach me the oven cloth."

Esther reached it.

"You know the old granary?" she said. "It seems very little use to anybody. I wonder if I might have it for a room of my own—a sort of studio. I've saved enough to have a skylight put in, and I would get a woman out of the village to clean it up."

"Why, you can do your drawing and painting in the dining-room or in your father's room, perhaps," objected Mrs. Moor.

"No," said Esther; "father's bored enough with us all as it is. Let him keep that room for himself and his broken crockery. But I'm not likely to marry, and I want a little place to call my own."

Mrs. Moor winced and turned aside over a baking-tin.

"Of course you can have it, dear," she said, "and anything else I can give you."

It was indescribably bitter to her that Esther should not have everything—her clever little Esther—who ought to have everything.

A queer triumph filled Esther's mind. She would get that granary ready and begin to set herself apart, and in a little while she would be ready to deliver those messages which it was so easy to *almost* believe—in the dark, quiet night—that she really heard. Surely, what ignorant "wise women" had been able to do, she could. A woman

had only to state a fact about the Unseen and some one would believe.

Mrs. Moor, looking up from the oven, caught that look.

"Esther, Ned's right. Something has come to you. What is it?"

Esther waited a moment.

"It's what I told you—a sort of idea that has come to me," she said very gravely. "I think I am going to do a great work. Others have had a message to deliver, so——"

She broke off. In the face of her mother's awed faith in her words it was impossible to continue. She must practise her lie on some one who did not believe in her, so that opposition should steel her for what nothing should prevent her doing.

"Are you going to write a great book?" asked Mrs. Moor, half whispering. "One with a message to reach every one that's lonely and poor and in trouble. Oh, Esther dear, I always said you could, when people have thought you might have done better than you did at your typing and things. I always said you had it in you."

"Yes. It's a message," Esther answered.

"Come," said Nellie, entering the kitchen, "the cart is round. Are you coming too, mother?"

"No," said Mrs. Moor, "I'll finish the mince pies. Tell your aunt Burdock the old dresses are in the big box underneath the box-room window. She'll know."

"Nice objects we shall look in them," said Nellie; "like old Nan Harwood down at Narfield Cottages. But it'll be better than not going at all."

VOICES

They found Miss Burdock in the yard as they drove up, but long before that they had heard her big voice booming through the quiet winter air. She was in the act of reproving a farm lad for being drunk the night before, and it was a sight—in the days when the most incapable farm lad "cheeks" his employer and departs if rebuked too harshly—to see how Tom Dixon quailed before the torrent of her invective. He would care nothing in two minutes, but in the meantime he saw himself and all his deeds and words as Miss Burdock saw them. She dominated him for the moment as a grown man dominates a scolded child, and the horsewhip which she shook to emphasize her words was, in her hands, no idle plaything.

"If you hit me I shall summons you," he yelled out at last, seizing on the one point to which he could retort.

"I'd let you," said Miss Burdock with scorn, "if you were worth thrashing, but you aren't; no man is, that would lie in bed sleeping off the drink while his horses hungered; but you'll see the inside of Lowport jail yourself before you've done if you don't mend your ways. And you leave Maggie Hackett alone, do you hear? You haven't a halfpenny saved to marry on, and you don't mean marrying. Let her alone."

A sullen red dyed his face.

"That's my own business," he said, looking down. "You've no more right to interfere with me than I have with you. Mr. Stallard was speaking at Masterby t'other night, and he said we oughtn't to let ourselves be dictated to about such things. Lots of folks don't believe in marriage—it's just been made up by people's brains, like the

telegraph and the gramophone. You're free to take your own stand about it and everything else. They were having it all over at the 'Red Lion' last Saturday, a chap out from Lowport was talking about it. I read the papers too. We've been kept down too long, we're going to do as we like now."

His face was of the more thoughtful type which is replacing the stolidness of the old plough-boy, and his dress was like that of a town labourer; there was no sort of rustic repose in his expression, for he had gained the look common to nearly every civilized person in these days, of being in a situation he despised, and longing to get out of it.

Miss Burdock stared at him—at his drawn face after the night's drunkenness, at his shaking hands—and her queer, strong face grew pitiful. He looked so rudderless. His forefathers had got drunk at the village ale-house often enough, but they hadn't looked like that. Illogically enough, there had been more hope in their hopeless future than in the certain prospects of reform which opened out before their successor. They had reverence and a dim but certain belief in everything, and a dull conviction that though the great God somewhere sent them rheumatism and hunger and death, He really cared—He was waiting at the end with Something to make up.

That had gone. Perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly. Everybody must see that with their own vision—but there seemed nothing at that moment in that cold yard on a winter's morning to take it's place in this man's mind.

"Had your breakfast?" growled Miss Burdock.

"No," said the man, surprised.

"Well, feed your horses and go into the kitchen and get some," she responded.

Then she strode into the sitting-room to find her nieces who had tramped up the stairs covered with oilcloth to the big loft at the top of the house where the accumulated rubbish of three generations of Burdocks was stored away. A big iron-clamped box under the window held old Mrs. Burdock's summer printed muslins and cottons, and heavy stuff winter gowns—not at all the wardrobe of the great-grandmother of fiction—and Esther and Nellie gazed in hopeless dismay at the heap on the floor.

"There," said Miss Burdock, straightening herself from her task. "Not much sign of a ball gown among those, I think."

"Well, it's these or nothing," said Nellie ruefully. "Here's a brown muslin with frills to the top of the skirt all printed in a pattern of white vine-leaves; I believe that would look all right, ironed out; and I could do my hair in little side-curls with a comb at the top like that picture in the parlour downstairs. I'll have this, if you don't want it, Esther."

"Oh, it would never suit me," said Esther. "I should look a caricature in it." She picked doubtfully at the heap of creased garments and considered whether she could afford a new dress, for she had saved something from her earnings. But the recollection of the skylight to be put in the granary stopped her. She must keep her money for other purposes and make the best of one of these old gowns.

VOICES

As she stood hesitating a gleam of sun struck through the attic window and caught a skirt of purple stuff, and Esther noticed for the first time what an odd purple it was, sombre and yet full of deep colour. The material was heavy, and patterns of braid on it spoilt the effect, but the colour was very good. Perhaps some freak of the dyers vat had caused it, for the braid did not match, nor the silk on the bodice; evidently the shade was not a usual one, even when the stuff was dyed.

Esther took it up and went to a cracked mirror on a table near, putting the folds of material across her breast as she walked; the sunlight from the window just reached her there, and even in the dusty glass she could see how strikingly the deep lustreless colour brought out the points in her appearance which she had always tried to soften and make ordinary, but was now going to accentuate. It was no use trying to be like other girls—that had failed—now she was going to be as different as possible.

She turned full round to the window, the light falling on her black hair; and the red gleams in it, and the intensity of her expression, and the yellow shine in her eyes, all seemed more vivid than they ever had done.

"Oh, don't wear that! Have this muslin if you can't find anything else. Don't think of wearing that," cried Nellie. A faint remembrance of her sister in the granary long ago, doing "the old witch at her," gave urgency to her voice. There was just a chance that other people would notice Esther's witch-like look as well if she went in that purple gown. The young men who were never too eager to dance with her might give up altogether then,

and Nellie could not imagine any situation more awful than to be at a dance without any partners. She stood in the sunlight holding out the brown muslin to Esther, quite flushed and eager.

"Here's a green muslin too," said Esther. "I'll wear that if you like, though I shall look like a badly dressed doll in it. But I should like to have this purple stuff too, if I may, Aunt Burdock. Great-grandmother was a big woman and I'm little. I can easily make myself a gown of it."

"Oh, do," said Aunt Burdock, "if you like, but," she paused, "I'm not much at clothes, you know, but I'm like Nellie—I don't think it suits you, Esther."

Esther did not reply, excepting to thank her aunt, but she smiled over the folds of purple cloth, and there was something secret in that smile so different to Esther's old candid impetuous look that Miss Burdock felt vaguely uncomfortable. It was, of course, the simple outcome of all Esther's secret thoughts, the expression which grows sometimes on very open faces with the possession of a hidden engrossing idea.

Before the night of the dance, New Year's Eve, the purple gown was made and the granary set in order; but though it was all clean and orderly there were no appliances for the study of painting or anything else; nothing save a great old oak chair from Aunt Burdock's attic, which had once been in Dunholme Church, and which stood upon a skin rug just underneath the skylight. The warm, dim shadows lay, as they had always done, in the corners of the long place, and the door had been so thoroughly mended

that not a clink was left for the light to come through. The walls were so thick that it was neither hot in summer nor intensely cold in winter, and the distant coo-coo-coo from a pigeon-cote on the roof was the only sound that ever penetrated the absolute silence.

It was on the morning of New Year's Eve that Esther finished the purple gown and put it on in her bedroom. There was no relief of white at throat or wrists, and her lips and eyes smiled oddly over the folds of unrelieved colour. She had got the right thing. Then she fetched a long glass from the spare room and dragged it up the granary steps.

When she had placed the mirror where she could see the chair plainly reflected in it she locked the door and loosened her hair until it stood out in thick straight folds round her face, lending depth to her eyes, which gleamed out with extraordinary brilliance. Then she sat down in the great chair under the shaft of strong morning sunlight and leaned forward gazing at herself in the mirror. The reflection that came back to her, startled even herself, it was so strange—so different to the conventional inner picture of herself which every woman treasures, and which is so different to reality.

She did not know that an artist, seeing her so, would have painted her with the subtle beauty which some old Italian painters have handed down to create an odd, stirred interest for all time. She only knew that she was so terribly different from anybody about Dunholme.

It was rather cold in the granary, and her courage began to flag. The great scheme seemed impossibly theatrical.

She would put it on one side. She was not made for big ventures, but just for plodding little everyday failures. She would go in and finish her dress for the dance.

So when the two Miss Moors entered the Shelton Assembly Rooms dressed rather alike, with flounces and combs and curls, everybody's first remark was: "What a pity they had chosen the same style." For Nellie's pretty shoulders, and soft cheeks shaded by curls, and round white wrist with the velvet band on it, were so sweetly in keeping with the early days of the nineteenth century that it seemed incongruous to hear her talking of telephones, and every man in the room unconsciously reverted back to those times when woman was a "delicate female" who wanted taking care of. But Esther's thin neck and dark vivid face created no such chivalrous sensations, while the curls into which she had tortured her heavy hair were most unbecoming, making her look common and insignificant.

Stallard was at the door of the dancing-room when they went in, but several men had already written their names on Nellie's programme during her progress down the narrow passage.

"Miss Nellie, don't fill up the programme before you've let me look at it," he entreated. "You promised me the supper waltz, you know, and I'll fight the man who tries to take it from me."

"Well, you won't have to fight about that," smiled Nellie, flushed a little with her triumphant entry, but natural as ever. "See, I've kept it for you, as you asked."

He wrote his name on her card as often as she would

allow him, then turned to Esther; only his infatuation for Nellie would have made him so forget his usual tact as to say abstractedly:

"Now, Miss Esther, have you a dance for me?" But Nellie had moved on and he was glancing after her.

"No," said Esther, with a long breath, "I'm not dancing."

"Not? What a pity," he said, following Nellie's train.

So for a minute or two Esther stood by the door quite isolated. People were all engrossed with one another. She sat down on a seat near the wall, and a laughing group in front hid her from view. She did not matter at all. Ned was standing by Nellie's side, proud to be seen with a sister whom all the fellows wanted to dance with. Mrs. Moor would be coming across from the Astleys' in a minute, and her anxious eye would seek round the room, then her pleasant face would fall to see her eldest daughter looking so out of it.

Esther felt the stirring of that power within her by which she could command attention if she only knew how to use it, but there seemed no channel for a woman to use it in, save that of being pretty and taking. She might have the gift of an orator, but she could not go out of a quiet village and straightway make her living by speaking on any question however important.

Things seemed all to narrow down to that one wild chance again—she would take it. No more going back now. Stallard should, anyway, pause to observe her if he did nothing else. He should never pass her over again with the easy indifference he had shown that night. These

people who did not give her a passing thought should be startled into recognition. She had been cast into the fight badly armed—she'd use any weapon that would bring her victory.

Wrong! The word trembled at the back of her mind.

"I don't care; I don't care," she answered, her hands clenched in their cheap gloves. "Father's right, I didn't ask to be pitchforked into the world, but now I'm here I'll get all out of it I can. I won't be left out. And if I do wrong the Power that created me is to blame for it. I will have a chance. If it isn't given me I'll steal it. Everybody has a right to a chance—we're learning that now after centuries of resignation—and when it isn't given we'll take it."

She sat there in the gaily lit room with all the cynical disbelief of her father, and all the crude ideas of every man's right to everything which she had heard of late, fermenting in her mind until what was partly good and partly evil produced a result which was natural enough, but potent, as such a state is, for any kind of harmfulness. The fermenting medium was supplied by her feeling for Stallard, which made her ready to do anything in the world to pierce his indifference. The same feeling in a different character has often produced suicide; but Esther was too strong for that, though not too strong to have the hysterical craving to make herself prominent in Stallard's eyes at any cost.

After a while the group before her parted and Astley came up to her. The strained look round her mouth, and a sort of desperate sadness about her, made him feel very

sorry to see her sitting there alone. He thought she was feeling neglected, or a little jealous of Nellie's triumph, and he sat down beside her, though he was due to claim the next dance from her sister.

"How pretty it all looks," he said gaily. Everything looked pleasant in the light of that next dance. "I suppose you and Miss Nellie got your dresses from Miss Burdock. I have just been hearing about them. They are much better than any in the room, I consider." As he spoke a very fat lady in bright blue velveteen, as Mary Queen of Scots, moved across their line of vision on the arm of a Highland chief in black evening trousers.

"Not much to be proud of in that," said Esther, trying to smile. "There is mother. Shall we go across to her?"

He rose and they moved on together.

"Mrs. Moor has been sitting with Mary," he said with a sigh. "Poor little girl, she has been crying because she can't go to dances like other girls."

Esther paused for a moment; and he had to pause too, though he was anxious to get on.

"Mr. Astley, what is the matter with Mary? The doctors all seem to be vague about it, and talk about want of nerve force, but I can't make out what the illness really is called."

Astley frowned, forgetting even Nellie for the moment in his anxious concern.

"One doctor we had recently," he said, "told me I was partly to blame. I had never made her rouse herself after mother's death and indulged her natural bent towards lethargy of nerve and muscle. But I don't

hope or preoccupation beyond soot
hurt, and was ready to grasp at th
easing it.

When she reached the house a light
and a maid responded to her ring.

"Is Miss Mary awake still?" she
well knowing that the girl never slept

"Yes, miss; will you go up and see
"Miss Mary told me you might run acr
you."

Esther crossed the hall, surrounded
sphere of solid, unpretentious prospe
handsome furniture, oil paintings of
port merchants who had never owed
asked a favour. The very atmosphe
stifle Esther's ambitions, and yet, o
very atmosphere in which such sch
earliest and best.

She went up the stairs and knocke
door on the first landing—Mary had
all disturbing sounds

hair straggling over the pillow, her fine skin was flushed a little and her light blue eyes held the vague, seeking look which all who have to do with nervous complaints know so well—the expression of wanting, terribly, something unknown.

"Well, Mary," Esther said, "how are you to-night?" It was a crime for friends of Mary's not to ask first thing after her health, for she thought so constantly of it herself that any momentary forgetfulness in others seemed the grossest want of sympathy.

"I'm worse," she said, moving her head wearily. "I am afraid the use of my arms will soon be failing me as well; they feel so heavy to lift, even now, and I can't hold a book any longer. Oh, Esther, I don't want to go on living. I'd rather die and be out of it all. Everybody is dancing away and enjoying themselves somehow, this New Year's Eve, and here am I a useless log and only twenty-two."

She began to cry with deep sobs that seemed to hurt her fragile chest, and the contrast between the luxurious comfort of the room, warm with firelight and scented with violets, and the pretty, miserable girl in the midst of it all, was very strong. Esther stood with her brown hand on the bed-rail, looking down at the quivering face, and just then the clock of Shelton Church began to strike solemnly the last hour of the passing year.

One! that was gone. That was all done. Two!——

Mary's sobs ceased—she gazed straight in front of her in a passion of despair.

For both those girls to whom all the hope of eternity

was free the years seemed to have slipped away—the best young years—and to have brought the hope of nothing.

"Oh, Esther," cried Mary, "I wish I was a good girl. I wish God and Christ and heaven seemed real to me. But they don't. They're shadows. They don't fill the emptiness, or if they do for a little while the place where they were seems more blank than before. There's your aunt Burdock—I once heard her preach—she really believes. I wish I were like her."

Then the bells clashed out—the old year was done. Hail to the new beginning!

"I wish you a Happy New Year, Mary," said Esther, bending over and kissing the girl's wet cheek; there was a new firmness in her tone, and her eyes shone in the strange way they always did when she was excited. "Don't cry any more, I've something to tell you. Something—wonderful! And you're the first person in all the world to know."

The despair in Mary's face gave place to a look of girlish curiosity as she grasped Mary's hand with hot, thin fingers.

"You're not—you're not engaged to Stallard?" she asked breathlessly.

A flood of painful red dyed Esther's dark face, and she drew her hand sharply away.

"No, what makes you say that?"

"Something Stephen once said," faltered Mary.

"Well, he was mistaken," said Esther, recovering herself. "It is something much more wonderful than being engaged to be married."

VOICES

Could anything be? thought Mary, wistfully watching her; and then the bells began clanging from little distant villages, the peal at Masterby could almost be distinguished; all the world seemed full of joy and greeting, but this one little corner of it.

"Draw the curtains," whispered Mary, shivering nervously. "I hate the sound of bells. They ring you out just like the year. The passing bell went twice last week. I can fancy them, tolling, tolling, while I go out into the cold and dark." She covered her head with the bedclothes, moaning pitifully.

Esther closed the heavy curtains across the bay window, but stood within it herself, looking out towards the church tower. The moon had just risen over it, and the night was clear and fine. Very soon the bells ceased and she opened the window, leaning out into the cool silence. How was she going to begin?

"Esther, Esther, what are you doing!" said Mary's voice, muffled by the curtain.

Esther closed the window, drew back the curtain and came back into the room. It had got, somehow, to be done now or never.

"I was listening to a message," she answered abruptly. Her manner would always be quite direct and simple however far-fetched her sayings might be. The Burdock blood in her would not let her be melodramatic so long as she retained control of her excited nerves. "I thought," she continued, "when the old year had passed, and the old disturbing suggestions with it, that I should be able to hear. There is everything in suggestion. A religious sect

I joined for a little while in London, when I was typist, taught me that. Do away with that past suggestion; leave yourself a clear field; and with faith anything is possible!"

"Why, how like your aunt Burdock you said that," exclaimed Mary. "Are you—do you mean you've got the sort of message preachers say they have. Are you going to be a local preacher too?"

"No," said Esther, still with the same bald, oddly convincing simplicity. "I've had a different message to that." She went to the window and threw it open so that a rush of cold air entered the room, then turned out the light. "Look, Mary, you see how still and empty that all seems? Dead quiet after the clanging of the bells?"

"Yes," murmured Mary, awed by Esther's serious tone.

"Well, it is not quiet," said Esther, finding with difficulty the awkward and stilted words. "That dark space out there is full of voices—only people can't hear them. Their ears are not even so well attuned to sound as those of animals and birds. But—Mary"—she hesitated, came to the bed and took the girl's hand in hers—"I have gradually found out that I can hear more than other people. For years I have suspected it, but was ashamed to say anything for fear mother would think it was just a child's nervous fancy—so I forced myself not to listen."

A coal dropped and Mary started violently.

"Now," went on Esther in the sincere, unfaltering voice which generations of plain-dealing Burdocks had bequeathed to her, "now I have started to listen again. I promised myself I would—for the first time—at the

turn of the year, from your window. I thought perhaps I might hear a message about you."

The cold air struck on Mary's face in the dark; nervous shudderings began to shake her; her thin throat contracted until she felt as if she must suffocate, though she had turned so icy cold.

"And—what—did you hear?" she gasped hysterically. "Oh, I've often thought I heard things in the night!"

Esther went back to the window, closed it, turned up the gas and stirred the fire into a blaze. Then she stood by the bed in the full light with her hand on Mary's and her odd, mesmeric eyes fixed upon the wavering blue ones.

"I waited at the window for a minute," she said, the words coming more easily now, as they did always when she was once *in* the story. It now was only like telling Charlie about the wood-people when they were both children. "And could hear nothing; I thought I had lost the power from long disuse. But the familiar sound of footsteps passing, though the road was quite deserted, began to come back to me. Then a very far, faint whispering—nothing intelligible. So I began to hope, and fixed my whole mind and soul upon the thought of you. My very self seemed to go out in listening for some news of you. At last, very indistinctly, I caught the sound of words, of which I can only tell you the sense. It meant—Let her rise from her bed to-morrow night at this time; take her hand in yours, and she will walk."

"Esther—Esther!" cried the girl. Then she fell back in the semi-unconscious state to which she was subject, and Mary rang for the maid-servant.

While the woman was hovering round the bed, Esther sat very quiet, exhausted by her efforts. Afterwards it would all come easily enough, no doubt, but the beginning was stilted and difficult. She did not yet realize how anxious people are to believe in anything if they have not already an engrossing faith—so anxious that they grasp at a straw, poor drowning souls, and hope it is a rope that reaches heaven.

Everybody wants to be in good health here and sure of eternity hereafter, and a far less convincing person than Esther has only to stand up at any street corner to found a new religion from the dissatisfied adherents of the old; this fact will become more startlingly apparent as time goes on. No one will be proof against these false faiths but those who hold the true faith fast with every power they possess.

When Mary was somewhat restored, Esther went up to the bed to say good-bye, and after she had done so turned to the maid.

"I am coming to-night at twelve o'clock," she said, "in order to be present at Miss Mary's recovery. She is to be dressed in her white dressing-gown and laid on the bed, then I shall take her hand and she will walk across the room with complete use of her limbs, though of course they will be stiff with lying so long."

The woman started and stared. She first thought that odd-looking Miss Moor had gone off her head, then imagined it was some sort of incomprehensible joke.

"Yes, yes," she said uncomfortably, opening the door for Esther to go out.

"You'll remember, Mary, and be ready," said Esther, looking back.

"I'll remember," said the invalid faintly, but with a gleam of excitement in her big light eyes. "Oh, I believe it's true; I feel a sort of inward stir—a sort of difference already. It's wonderful—wonderful—but I do believe it's true."

The maid came out with Esther, shutting the door.

"You want to be careful what tales you tell Miss Mary," she said indignantly. "A young lady as excitable as that isn't to be played tricks with, Miss Moor, though you'll perhaps think I've no business to say so."

Then she flounced back into the bedroom.

Esther slipped into the library and let down those disfiguring sausage curls at her temples, shaking the long strands out and gathering them up in her usual style. That accomplished, she put on her cloak and shawl and ran across the road to the Assembly Rooms, where the country carts and the three or four cabs belonging to Shelton were already drawn up to take the guests away. Just as she went up the steps Astley met her in hat and overcoat.

"Oh," he said, "I'm so sorry you've walked back alone. I was just coming to fetch you. Your mother and sister are having a cup of soup before they start on the cold drive home and so must you."

Esther said, truly enough, that she was quite warm, but he persisted until it was less trouble to acquiesce than to refuse.

The dancing was over now, and the dancers stood about the hall chatting and taking cups of soup from the trays

in her hair with another on her ordi
and such economy highly recommen
Pobson. He felt he was getting flight
combined—a miracle like finding ch
honest ale in the same bottle—so
jubilant.

Mrs. Moor's vivid expression of u
ness was more striking than usual be
tired lines of age about her mouth an
rejoicing in Nellie's triumph; Nellie
a glow of soft, bewildered pleasure.
asked for more dances than she coul
week of parties and to feel that ever
Even the old Vicar, who had looked
noticed her prettiness and said she
Masterby Hall. Her little modest air
and the parted curls.

Esther's dress looked the funniest
charming toilette, especially now she
in the accustomed modern fashion.

She came forward and slipped her arm through Esther's.

"Well, Esther, how did you find Mary?" she said, loud enough for the bystanders to hear, because she wanted them to know that if Nellie were a success in one way, Esther was extraordinarily good in another.

"Mary is lucky to have such a friend," added Astley, "very lucky indeed. Few young ladies would leave a ballroom to go and visit the sick."

"I'm sure they wouldn't," said Mrs. Pobson heartily, and some one else brought hot soup, though Esther had already had a cup. These kindly people were anxious, somehow, to make up to poor Esther for looking her worst in that dress, and seeming so out of it, while Nellie was admired by everybody.

But Esther noticed nothing of this, because every faculty she possessed was absorbed by one consideration: Should she throw down the gauntlet now?

She glanced from one to the other; last of all at Stallard's indifferent gaze passing over her to some one behind, as if she were not there. It was his indifference which decided her. He should be indifferent no longer.

"I found Mary very ill," she said distinctly, in answer to her mother's question, and the carrying property of her voice made it reach beyond the little group to the farthest parts of the half-empty room. "But I have found out that she is going to recover, for at midnight, just as the bells were ringing, I went to the window and leaned out." She paused, but not dramatically, speaking all the time with the blunt plainness of the Burdocks and knowing how lamely and badly she did it, but deter-

mined to go on. "I wonder if you've ever leaned out, or listened on a very still night, and heard sounds you knew couldn't be there?"

A few loiterers joined the group, attracted by the absolute clearness with which they could hear what Esther said; her voice, like Jane Burdock's, was very compelling now there was a purpose behind it. Mrs. Moor looked puzzled, and a little uneasy. What was Esther driving at? Ned turned red and rattled his keys. Nellie's eyes widened.

"Well," Esther continued, "that's what I did. I heard sounds which I thought could not be there. I often have done before. Years back, as a child, I used to hear the sound of people passing; then when I looked out, half frightened, there was nobody. Nothing but the shadow of the ash tree on the empty road. So I used to close the window and try to forget. But to-night I waited. I didn't come away and try not to listen—so I heard."

She paused again and glanced at Stallard, he was looking at her now, not past her.

"Well, what did you hear?" panted Mrs. Pobson.

"I heard the faint sounds and whisperings that I have heard before so often and made myself believe were tree leaves in the wind, or bare branches rubbing on each other; but after a while, straining my ears, I caught a meaning, not exactly in the form of words, but conveying something to me that meant words." She turned away from her mother. "I had a message that Mary would get better."

"Where from?" blurted out Ned, very red and ashamed of his sister.

Esther looked at him just as she had done a thousand times when they differed, her yellow eyes focussing under heavy brows, conscious of failure, but dogged to the end.

"From the Source of all Healing, I believe," she said in a cold way that sounded convincing because of the effort with which she spoke. She did not like saying that, but she would not even consider the right or wrong of it, she was going to do this thing and was ready to take the consequences. If there were to be any paying at the finish—which Mr. Moor's theory of a Deity who created us and left us to make the best or worst of it did not lead her to believe possible—then she'd pay. In the meantime she was going to stick to it; even though the words seemed as if they would not come.

The quaint figure she looked, with her rough head rising above the flounced muslin as she defied her little world in its gayest mood, where she had least part in it, would have appealed to those who like any fight against great odds, but they could not have helped foreseeing certain failure. How was she to do it? A little adventuress with no weapons such as one is accustomed to see adventuresses use and with only such a narrow little corner of the north country to adventure in.

Mrs. Pobson was the first to recover from the surprise, because the good desire to help was always stronger in her than any other feeling she could have.

"Come, Esther," she said, slipping her hand in its tight white glove through the girl's arm. "You've got a bit of a chill running out into the cold night out of this hot room. I doubt it's the beginning of influenza: my old

a glance at Stallard's roused face, tl
which every one in the room turned
her resolution. For the first time ir
egotism was soothed by notoriety, a t
quicker than the love of opium.

"Mrs. Pobson," she said, "you thi
I was never so sane in my life. The m
the saner you are—and to-night I un
I have ever done."

"It's all tommy-rot," cried Ned.
as you used to do when we were kids.
Australia—he knows how you used to
with tales about people growing out
minded, but he used to fancy faces w
every oak-tree trunk when we went n
Woods. But the world isn't like Char

Esther then threw up her head, encou
instead of disheartened; the sense of
stubborn resolution gave place to a co
part of the world for her purpose was i

"Oh, Esther," cried Mrs. Moor. "What am I to think? What am I to think?"

"Think——" Esther paused, what was she to answer? Then an idea came. "Think that your inward feeling about my doing something always meant this, mother. It must have been a sort of instinct—telling you I was different. I was marked out to bear a message."

Esther stopped, pale and breathless. This was horrid—perfectly horrid—if she only had not tasted the poisoned drug of notoriety she might have retracted then. But the change from neglect to prominence was too great, too complete, for her to go back now.

At that moment Astley came back into the room.

"Astley," said Ned excitedly, "here's Esther saying she is going to cure Mary. She's got a message from above and is going to work the cure at twelve to-morrow night just by saying 'Get up and walk.' I call it rot. Tell her you won't have it. Stop all this nonsense at once."

"What does this mean?" said Astley, greatly astonished, looking from one moved face to the other.

In a few words Ned told him, and Esther said quietly:

"It's true enough in the main facts. I shall bear a message of healing. I've been given a great trust."

Astley looked down for a moment to recover the self-control he was on the point of losing, the idea of having his sister's sickness paraded in this way was more odious to him than Esther could imagine, but for Nellie's sake he restrained himself.

"We'll talk over this to-morrow, Miss Esther," he said.

"I will call on you after I come from Lowport, and you must go home now. Your trap is quite ready, Mrs. Moor."

But Nellie, very pale and lovely, with her usual pretty air of modesty increased by the old-fashioned dress she wore, put an arm around her sister and faced Astley.

"You don't believe in Esther?" she said breathlessly. "You think she's lying? Well, she isn't! She's always heard more and seen more than I could. I remember when we played in the granary I thought it was all play, though I was frightened. But it wasn't. She had a power; I understand that now."

Astley looked desperately at Nellie's sweet excited face and trembling mouth.

"I don't know what to make of it," he said. "I'm sure she thinks she is speaking the truth—but it can't be. I can't have her teaching these ideas to a nervous, hysterical girl like my sister. Everybody fancies they hear queer noises sometimes, of course. You can't make that into a religion. Esther is overwrought—that's all."

"Then you've got to let her come to-night and *prove* she is silly and wrong," said Nellie, "or I shall never speak to you again—never!"

"Mrs. Moor," said Astley, "for goodness sake come away. We can talk about this afterwards."

But Mrs. Moor watched Esther with a great light in those young brown eyes set in her worn face, and she shared the joy that Jewish women knew when they thought a prophet was born to them. This, then, was what her faith in Esther meant from the very beginning. Her clever little lass—she'd always known—and mental healing

was too much in the air to seem quite impossible even at Shelton.

Her thoughts grew to a jubilate too grand for any words, and she did not even hear Astley speaking to her as she took Esther's hand, though she echoed his wish.

"Come home, dear," she said. "I'm glad, but I'm not surprised. I might have known. Why, I fancied I heard the Lowport Town Band playing outside at East Fallowes the night you were born; and it was dead-still and winter time."

Esther's hand felt like ice as she clutched her mother's, looking intently into that worn, vivid face.

"Then you're glad, mother?" she said; and she too forgot there was any one else within hearing. "You're really glad?"

Even then Esther could have gone back when she first realized how great her mother's faith and love were, because they made everything else, for a breathing-space, look small and of no matter. She hung on the reply—ready——

"I'm the proudest mother in the world," cried Mrs. Moor, with a catch in her voice. Then, after a pause, she burst out, "Your aunt Burdock 'll see now I was right. I always told her you'd *do* something."

CHAPTER VII

THE next morning is always the test time of every night adventure, and when the Moor family breakfasted by candle-light after a few hours' sleep, with sea-fog creeping in at door and window, and Ned's eye upon the dimly seen clock, it really was a typical next morning.

Esther looked pale and sallow, with dark rings round her eyes; she had evidently not slept at all, neither had her mother, but Nellie was still flushed with drowsiness; and no event would disturb Mr. Moor, because he armed himself against fate by expecting everything and nothing.

The housemaid glanced round at them all as she brought in the toast and drew her own conclusions—one of those unexpected conclusions which such women learn to draw when their attention and interest are narrowed down to one household.

"There's Miss Esther sitting like a statue, crumbling a bit of bread because Stallard didn't take any notice of her at the ball, I expect," said the housemaid when she went out. "Well, I'm not surprised—the sight she did look in that gown—and Miss Nellie like a picture. But it's too bad, all the same. Miss Nellie ought to leave Stallard alone. She's got plenty o' chaps."

"Some's never satisfied unless they've every lad in the

place tagging at their heels. I could name some no further away than this fireplace," said the kitchenmaid pointedly. She had been out to Shelton to look on at the ball the night before, and it was next morning with her too.

But, of course, Esther never dreamed that the things deep hidden within her were as clear as day to these two girls; indeed, her anxiety was not due to Stallard this time, because she had given up hoping he would ever love her. She was only determined he should not calmly overlook her any more.

The silence round the breakfast table became oppressive.

"Well, Nellie, how did you enjoy yourself?" said Esther with an effort. Nellie felt ashamed to refer to what had happened the night before, for the memory had that staleness which moments of witnessed emotion leave on wholesome minds.

"Oh, all right," she answered, looking away, while Ned hastily took out his watch and left the table.

Mr. Moor very neatly put some circulars back into their envelopes—he had a perfect genius for doing trifles well that were no use to any one—and also rose from his seat.

"Your mother tells me, Esther," he said, with his hand on the chair-back, "that you've got a message from above. May I ask if you intend to make money by it?"

Esther looked straight at him.

"I shall make a charge in order to increase my sphere of usefulness," she said.

"In that case," he replied, "I have no further remark to offer. I've never made any money for you and I can't pretend to interfere with the way in which you choose to

do it for yourself. Anything's possible, I've always told you that. I'm not going to say your mysterious message isn't possible too; only don't bring it, or the believers in it, if you find any, into this house. I won't speak of it, I won't hear of it, I won't know anything about it. Do you understand?"

"I've always understood," said Esther.

Then he went out, and Mrs. Moor gazed at Esther with the joy she had felt a few hours earlier growing very dimmed and faint. To her, too, it seemed more like a fantastic dream than a positive certainty. She was ready to rejoice and believe again if Esther led the way, but in the meantime she was afraid and despondent.

"My dear," she said, "don't worry yourself. If you don't feel the same to-day as you did last night, just leave it all. The same feelings may come to you again, but if not, it is all right. I shall know you were speaking only of what you thought you heard. I shall always believe that, even if you do send word to Mary that she is not to expect you. Let me write to her for you and explain—I can easily explain."

Esther tried to smile, though she was feeling sick with anxiety and suspense. What would become of her in the very probable event of Mary's not being able to walk after all? She would be the laughing-stock of every one.

"You need not write, mother," she said, "but I want you to come with me. You and Nellie and Stephen Astley must all be there. I want you to be there when I carry my first message of healing."

Her blood flowed faster as she spoke, her courage grew with the demand she made upon it, and the true adventurer's spirit rose within her, making her ready to win or lose everything on a single throw. This was better than dragging out a life with no possibilities in all the long dull future; she'd seen her chance and taken it before age came to stop all chances. No failure could bring back that dead blank again—she'd had her chance.

"But," said Nellie open-eyed, "suppose it doesn't happen—suppose she doesn't get up off the bed—what shall you do? There was that faith-healer at Masterby, you know, who couldn't cure old Mr. Parker."

Esther did not even wince now at her own fear put into words; she was not going to fail, she would succeed.

"Do?" she cried, jumping up. "Why, I shall ask for another message—one that will tell me how to heal her. It would come, I've only to wait."

"But Mary wouldn't like waiting," said Nellie. "Oh—it would be horrible—keep away, Esther, if you are not quite sure."

Esther stood by the chair-back in much her father's attitude, and looked with great gravity from one to the other. She realized how little Mary would like waiting, and what the hysterical reaction would be. But she felt certain the nervous shock and the stimulation of will-power would produce the desired effect; it had been done a thousand times before with the same class of invalid. Every quack doctor had cripples—bona-fide cripples—in the crowd, who flung away their clutches. To every holy well women were carried helpless and walked joyfully

home again. The many sects which base their influence on this theory had each a thousand cases to quote of miraculous healing. Why, out of all these, should she fail? It was simply a question of inspiring enough belief.

The wonder was aroused only because the world had forgotten for a little the mysterious power of faith.

"I'm sure," she said, drawing a deep breath, "I'm quite sure. Do you think I'd let mother come if I were not? I'm only the agent—I've only the message to deliver—I'm only the messenger."

Ah, that was what she would call herself—The Messenger. It was wonderful how easy it all became as she went on, just like those endless tales which she and Charlie invented, and which used to go stiffly at first, not seeming real, but which grew more and more engrossing until they did actually see the forest people of their imagination on every tree-trunk in Masterby Woods; while each detail of the strange deeds that happened when night came and the trees were alive, became as real to them as the milk and biscuits they had when they were called in to bed.

"Well, I'm going to put away my evening dress, and then bake some queen cakes," said Nellie. "There's nothing for tea, and Stephen Astley is coming out by the three train from Lowport; he told me so last night just before we left."

"I shall not see him," said Esther calmly. "I am not going to disturb myself by useless argument." She used this catchword from another sect as naturally as if it were a part of her everyday thoughts and not a forgotten platitude. But all sorts of phrases came back when

she needed them, now that she was once in the swing of the story. Just as she had gathered when a child how a princess should talk from forgotten fairy-tales and bits of history, so now all she needed was drawn by a kind of magnet to the top of her mind, and a very pleasant sense of power and exhilaration came with the realization of this happening. All great speakers know what this feels like—words and facts rising to the blank surface beneath which all seemed empty—giving a sense of limitless capability.

"Not see Stephen Astley?" said Mrs. Moor doubtfully. "Oh, I think you must, dear. He would think it so odd and unkind. He might even say you were not to go to the house."

"Mary's of age—he can't prevent my visiting her," said Esther, "and you must leave me to judge what is best for me to do. I decline to discuss the matter with him. And—and mother—don't be hurt—but I can't talk about it at all when I am not directly engaged in my mission. I must not dissipate my strength in useless words. I must store my power as I receive it from the Source of all power."

So the jumble rose to her lips, just as she needed it, and the sense of being again equal to anything made her look oddly illuminated; the plain way in which she said the meaningless phrases gave them a sort of sincere meaning; they sounded quite real as things *had* to do, spoken by Burdock lips, because only real things had passed through them for many centuries, and in speaking Esther was entirely a Burdock.

Mrs. Moor and Nellie looked at her as she stood at the far end of the room in the queer light between misty morning and yellow lamp-flame, and she seemed to be much farther away than she actually was—an effect of atmosphere made her seem to stand in that yellowish-grey light a very long way off—oddly remote from the hearth where Nellie and her mother sat together. Mrs. Moor's pride and joy grew stronger again, and she began once more to feel like the Jewish mother, but she was afraid as well. Her little lass seemed to be standing apart from her already; for she felt the reserve in Esther with a sure instinct. No one can go from confidence to reserve of all confidence without a mother finding it out, though she may not know there is anything to hide; and Mrs. Moor felt the barrier, though she could not reason about it; she only thought that Esther's high mission placed her naturally apart from, and above ordinary mortals. And Nellie felt the same in a less degree. This was not the Esther who had cried because the dressmaker spoilt her winter coat and skirt—it was Esther as one might imagine her in heaven, not caring about any dear little everyday things.

"I'm going to have a fireplace put in the granary," said Esther at this moment. "I must have a place to see people in, and for when I want to be alone. I'm going to lie down now and see if I can sleep. I was awake all night—thinking."

She went away to her room and lay on her bed, exhausted. It came easier, after all, than she had expected. She had only to pretend she was The Messenger, just as she had pretended for weeks to be a forest princess, with

Charlie for audience. In those days she had eaten out of a golden bowl, though to other people it looked plain blue and white, and had made Charlie feel a crown upon his untidy head, because she not only saw, but had the power to make him see with her.

All the house was hushed while she lay and slept off her exhaustion and the strain of the night before. Suspense was over now. She was ready to make her throw and abide by the consequences, as the true adventurer ever is, though she looked a little pale nobody with her head on the pillow in the darkened room.

About four o'clock the sound of voices woke her, just when her mother stole in to see if she were still asleep. Mrs. Moor stood for a moment before Esther opened her eyes, looking down at the dark face, with the look which great painters have almost caught sometimes on the face of the Madonna. Such selfless love and yearning to give all happiness were in that look. The very epitome of her life's thought that her little lass ought to have everything —not a trace of selfish regret at being left out of it herself. If the girl were only happier, though apart and rather far off, what did anything else matter ?

Stephen Astley, in the room beneath, had walked from Shelton, with less eagerness to reach East Fallows than he ever felt before. He was quite as ready as any knight of old to cast himself among the lions for his lady's sake, but it was another thing to cast his sister there. No danger could be allowed to approach her because of his fear of offending Nellie. He simply could not allow Esther to try experiments on the mind of a woman who

belonged to his household and who was therefore sacred to him.

But there was nothing, however unreasonable, that he would not have done himself; he was capable, as men are whose sane reserve has felt every power unspent, of impulses which would carry him far further than the passionate spirit of a man who always acted on impulse. Only he could not bring Mary into it.

The moment he entered the room where Nellie sat by the fire, he saw how it was going to be.

"Well," she said, giving him her hand. "I suppose you'll stay to tea and drive back with us?"

She lost no time in showing him she was intending to stand by Esther, though she could not understand what it all meant.

"No," he said. "I'm sorry, but I am afraid I shall have to return to dinner. I must tell Mary that Miss Esther is not coming. Miss Nellie—she mustn't come. You don't understand how hysterical and highly strung Mary is, or you wouldn't suggest it—I am sure you wouldn't—but you never see her."

"She doesn't like me," said Nellie. "But that's no reason why I should not want her to get well. Besides"—she paused and looked Astley full in the face—"do you mean to tell me Esther is lying?"

"She is deceiving herself," said Astley. "I'm sure she is not consciously untruthful, but she is one of Mary's sort—high strung and hysterical too. Such women can think they hear and see anything. Any doctor could tell you of a hundred cases you'd never dream

of—where people fancy they hear all sorts of queer things."

"Oh, it isn't like that with Esther," interrupted Nellie. "She's always been different—cleverer than me—apart from other people—you must have seen it yourself."

"Yes, I've noticed she is different," replied Astley, using Nellie's word after a pause. The word he thought was "odd," but he did not like to say it. "Still, that doesn't prove she is better than you." He paused again and went on slowly: "Perfection is never different, it's just the ordinary quite right; and you are the ordinary woman that all men want for their wives and mothers, only better in every little thing. Your hair lovelier, your eyes more blue, your pretty ways sweeter."

He stopped short, knowing what a bad time he had chosen after all, or rather he had not chosen it—the words had come of themselves—rising naturally out of that well of pure romance that was within him.

An ash fell in the grate. Overhead Mrs. Moor walked across the room.

"Nellie," he said, "Nellie, you must know I want you."

His clear-cut face and candid eyes were transfigured as he turned to her, he might have gone looking for a Holy Grail with such a face as that, but Nellie only thought how uncomfortable it was and wished to goodness she had stopped him in time—only she did like being told how sweet she was by any one who seemed to mean it as Stephen Astley did.

"I'm sorry," she said. The situation was less new to her than to Astley, and that was how she usually replied.

And it was true enough. She *was* sorry. She hated to make people unhappy, but would have hated still more not to have a lover. "I'm very sorry. But I don't care for you in that way, Mr. Astley."

"I didn't expect it all at once," he answered. And really his idea of her was that she would never fall into a man's arms like a ripe plum. She would only give herself slowly, delicately, after an infinite reluctance, he thought, because he understood nothing at all about a woman in love.

"You must never expect it," she answered gravely.

"Ah, you're young—you don't know what love is yet," he cried eagerly, going close, but not venturing to touch her. "You'd wait for your sweetheart to teach you, dear. You'd never learn but from your promised husband—you're too pure to let your thoughts dwell on a man in the way of loving before he asked you to, I——"

He broke off, for a flood of shamed crimson so dyed Nellie's face that there was no ignoring it. Tears started to her eyes with the pain, and she put up her hands to hide her hot cheeks.

Little as Astley knew of women he understood that this overwhelming blush had nothing to do with him, and the question shot through his mind, Who was the cause of it?

The answer came quick with a deadly certainty—Stallard!

He pulled himself together and faced it as best he could—there was all life to be sorry in, and he had to take the blow like a man now, at any rate. He wouldn't whine against the irrevocable.

"If your love's given," he said, "you'll not let me try

to steal it away, you're not that kind. I shall always be glad to think I've loved the sweetest girl there was—nothing can take that from me."

"Oh," said Nellie, "what a beast I feel—what a beast I feel."

"It wasn't your fault," said Astley. "You couldn't help being lovely."

If proposals were no novelty to Nellie, this way of taking a refusal was so new to her that she began to cry.

"I couldn't help leading you on," she sobbed. "You shan't go away thinking me better than I am. I did lead you on, but I didn't think it would be like this."

"Don't cry, dear," he said. "Don't let us ever speak of it again; we'll still be friends, if you will let us be."

Footsteps in the room above, and voices, reminded Nellie of what she had forgotten. She was sorry for Astley, but there was Esther to think of—she must stick to Esther.

"We can only be friends," she said, "if you believe in Esther. I can't be friends with any one who thinks Esther a hysterical idiot, if not worse. But if you will let her come to your house to-night and prove, in common justice to herself, whether she is right or wrong, you will have all my gratitude and all my friendship. I shall know you've done a difficult thing for my sake, and that's the proof of being friends—isn't it?"

He flushed to the roots of his hair, all over his pale, clear-cut face.

"I can't," he said with an effort. "You know I can't."

Nellie stood up facing him, fighting for Esther with the

deep loyalty she had felt for her sister ever since she was a baby. It was part of her, whereas Astley was only a friend she was sorry for, and at any cost to him Esther must be defended. She searched desperately round in her mind for a weapon, and snatched one which she had no business to use.

"You'd have let Esther go if I had promised to marry you!" she said.

"No, that would have made no difference," answered Astley.

"You could have refused me when I'd just promised?" cried Nellie. "Then I've wasted my pity—then you never cared."

"Nellie," said Astley, "you know that isn't fair. Wrong wouldn't have been right even if—even if you'd loved me."

Nellie saw she was going to fail. It was no use—and as she was overwrought and excited by all the events of the past twenty-four hours, she began to cry again, but quietly, not with any hope of exciting pity or getting her own way. For a few moments Astley stood and listened to her, then he really could bear it no longer, Mary had to go.

"Hush, dear," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Don't cry so. Poor little loyal girl, your sister shall have a chance to prove that she is mistaken. It will hurt her, and you, less in my house, than if the exposure happened anywhere else. And Mary"—he sighed impatiently—"well, Mary must take her chance."

Nellie looked up from her tears all flushed with gladness.

"Dear Stephen," she said softly.

But he went to the uncurtained window and stared out into the darkness and fog, feeling no more glad than an honest man does when he has let his love get the better of his common sense.

CHAPTER VIII

THE discreet house where old John and Robert Astley stared at each other from carved gilt frames across the entrance, and where every stick of furniture came from the dull rooms in Lowport High Street, whence the Astleys sprang, was as odd a background for what was happening next night as could be imagined. But in real life things will happen out of their setting, and Stephen Astley went up the thickly carpeted stairs in the black tail coat he always wore in an evening with a sense of having somehow desecrated the good mahogany chairs and the bronze coat-rack in the hall.

To be honest, upright, God-fearing folk without verging from the beaten track which thousands of sturdy north-countrymen had trodden hard, was a habit with the Astleys —as difficult to break as any other.

Now Stephen felt himself to be wandering off into some bare field where there was nothing to be found but rank weeds.

And Nellie.

Nellie's friendship waited for him out there, though not her love, and he had to follow because he loved her.

The baize doors at the top of the staircase stood ajar,

and the clock on the landing outside pointed to two minutes to twelve. He paused while the heavy pendulum ticked away another minute. It was impossible to say how he hated all this mummery. Then he went into the room where Esther in her purple gown stood near the bed, while Nellie, with Mrs. Moor and the maid, sat as far away as space permitted. Mary lay still, her great eyes fixed on Esther, a look of supreme exaltation on her flushed, delicate face.

Astley stationed himself near the door, and the clock on the stairs began to make the whirring sound which always came when it was about to strike.

Esther turned a shade paler, and Mrs. Moor caught her breath audibly; Mary began to shudder with hysterical excitement.

The clock struck the twelve strokes, and as the sound of the last "boom" echoed from the landing Esther took hold of Mary's hand and said:

"Come, Mary, get up."

She said it with the same simple assurance and composure as if calling Mary to rise in the morning, but her yellow eyes seemed to emit light under her heavy brows, they were so extraordinarily bright.

Mary sat up in bed and made an effort to move, then sank back on the pillow.

"Oh, Esther," she gasped, "I can't—I can't. It's no use."

"You can," answered Esther, grey-white, but for her eyes and hair, but still quite calm. "Fix all your mind on that—you can." She bent over the panting girl. "Try to realize it. You can!"

Mary sat up and struggled again, then fell back exhausted with a faint cry.

"I can't."

"Stop," said Astley, coming forward. "I'll have no more of this. Let her alone. I ought never to have allowed this to happen."

Mrs. Moor went up to Esther, all other feeling swallowed up in sympathy for this ignominious failure.

"Come home, dear," she whispered, putting her hand on her daughter's arm.

But Esther flung it off and turned at bay, like some fierce wild thing trapped, facing them all.

"It's the suggestion in your minds that is working on her. You won't *let* her walk," she cried. "She could. She has the power if you'd let her use it. Mary!"

"No," said Astley, "you shall not trouble her again—poor girl. It's too cruel. I cannot allow you to see Mary again. This degrading farce—this lie——"

"Lie!" shrieked Mary, roused by opposition to a tremendous effort. "It isn't a lie. It's—it's true!"

In a semi-delirious state of hysterical excitement, she flung her arms around Esther, dragged herself to her feet, pushed Esther away, and tottered a few steps across the floor.

"Don't touch me," she gasped. "Don't touch me."

For a moment she stood so, staring round at them, her wild gaze growing calmer; at last she brushed her hand across her eyes and looked again, a great awe and thankfulness gradually illuminated her fair flushed face with the weak sweet mouth.

"Why," she whispered, "it *is* true, I *can* walk. Esther, Esther!"

"Of—of course it's true," said Esther, swaying a little. "Come, mother. I've given my message. I'm very tired. Sleep well, Mary, and get up to-morrow to a new life. You're cured. You can't be helpless any more. Good night."

She went out and down the stairs, holding by the hand-rail, and opened the front door. The air blew in her face with the keen sting of salt and frost in it, until she was revived. She felt ready for the fight again by the time Astley reached her.

"Won't you wait in the library?" he said stiffly. "Your mother and sister are there. Mrs. Moor seems a little upset."

Indeed poor Mrs. Moor was crying quietly from revulsion of feeling after the strain of the bitter disappointment, and the triumphant end, and Nellie trembled visibly with excitement.

"Well," she flung out at Astley as they came in. "Don't you believe in Esther now?"

Astley looked at her pretty, overwrought face and quivering lips. What a shame to bring her into this! But his hour of weakness was over.

"No," he said, "I don't believe in her supernatural powers, if that is what you mean. She has no more a message from the unseen world than I have. She is simply deceiving herself—I don't say she is deliberately deceiving us—but it comes to the same thing. She's just one of a thousand faith-healers, she's got the same principle

as witches had when they sold charms and philtres—she's using the sacred power of faith for her own ends."

"And for Mary's," cried Nellie indignantly. "You forget Mary has walked after two years of helplessness."

"Ah! but I see now that the last doctor she had was right. It was just want of will power," said Astley.

"Then why didn't he give it her? Esther has done that," said Nellie. "You can't deny that Esther has succeeded where he failed."

"The doctor said if she had been obliged to work, or had children to look after, she would never have been an invalid," argued Astley desperately.

"Anyway," said Mrs. Moor, rising, "the result is one you must be glad of, Mr. Astley."

"I don't know, I don't know," said Astley. "She'd have got better if I had been firmer with her myself. I ought to have sent her away to a home as the doctor advised. Miss Esther"—he paused, thinking how to put it—"Miss Esther—may I ask you as a great favour not to mention this. I can't endure to think of my sister being made a wonder of, a beginning of a mistaken theory."

"You must leave me to do as I think best in that matter," said Esther gravely. "It will be for Mary to judge. I believe she will think it a great privilege."

"But"—it was horribly hard to say with Nellie there—"but I must ask you not to see Mary. I must positively forbid you to see her."

"That," said Esther, "will not be possible unless you wish Mary to leave your house. She will naturally insist

on seeing me, though I shall not come here, and I shall welcome her."

"Mrs. Moor," said Astley, "may I beg of you not to receive my sister."

"My mother," said Esther, with the new aloofness which came easily to her now, as everything did that she wanted, "my mother has no concern in this matter at all. I have a room of my own, where I shall receive those who wish to consult me without her knowing who they are—or anything of them. I have told Mary about it because I feared this opposition, and I think you must agree that a brother has no right to oppose the religious convictions of a sister by active means. You can't do anything, I think, however you may feel about it."

"But there's one thing," said Nellie, very pink and angry, "which you might as well realize; and that is about your coming to see us yourself. We don't want a man at our house who doesn't wish his sister to know Esther. Please remember that."

Astley looked from Nellie to her mother with a great pity and regret. What a shame to drag them into a thing like this—to use their extraordinary loyalty and affection. Then he turned to Esther.

"You know best," he said, "how far you are deceiving yourself. I see that I am helpless to prevent you continuing the course you have begun, though I'd give anything—However, that's not the question—I only beseech you to think again—to pause before you are irrevocably committed."

"Come, mother," said Esther once more.

"Yes, we'll go," said Nellie. "The trap is outside."

But Mrs. Moor did not go so readily, for she had learned with time how rare friends like Stephen Astley were, and did not think, like Nellie, that the world was full of them.

"Good-bye, Stephen," she said, calling him by his Christian name. "On the first day that you think differently come up to East Fallows, we shall understand."

Then the solid door clanged behind them, and Astley was alone in the dull hall under the hall lamp, with a sense of his loneliness that he had never had before. So that was done. The romance which had bloomed in the midst of a business routine that made it most exquisite, like flowers set on neutral grey, was quite over. Well! there was Mary still to think of, and he went up again unconsciously thankful for that. But the maid met him outside the door.

"Please, sir, Miss Mary says she would rather not see you for a day or two. She is afraid you would unsettle her mind."

"But, Susan," said Astley, "that won't do, you know. You must tell her I particularly want to speak to her—not to-night—but to-morrow morning. I'll go to business by a later train."

Susan's face became set and obstinate.

"That is what Miss Mary told me to say, sir," she replied.

"But you know she often thinks differently in the morning," said Astley, at a disadvantage, as a man is in dealing with female servants.

There was a pause.

"Well, you understand what I mean?" he said sharply.

"Yes, sir," answered Susan. "But I must own, meaning no offence, that I think Miss Mary would be best let alone. It's a wonderful thing that's happened—a miracle, as you might say—and you want time for it to work."

"That reminds me, I must forbid you to mention this matter outside the house, Susan," said Astley.

"Then," said Susan, "I shall be pleased if you'll take my notice a month from to-day, because I'm going to bring my little sister to Miss Moor that has St. Vitus's dance, and I shall ask her about mother's rheumatism."

Astley thrust his hands in his pockets, bewildered and angry, and yet deeply glad that Mary appeared to be really better. What on earth was he to do?

One thing remained certain—he would not have Mary made a show-case of if he could help it.

"You must do as you like about leaving," he said, "but I will never give my consent to your talking about what happened in Miss Mary's room to-night."

"But if I don't tell my sister that, however am I to get her to come?" demanded Susan. "I'm afraid I must give in my notice, sir."

"Very well," said Astley, going downstairs to put out the hall lamp.

When he came up again he found Susan waiting for him.

"Please, sir, I've been remembering that I was as much against Miss Moor as ever you are before I saw what happened to-night. But Miss Mary is certain she'll go on walking now—she feels the power in her—so what can you think? I don't want to leave, but if it comes to,

I must. You couldn't say there was any trick about it with Miss Esther just as plain-spoken and ordinary as you and me. She had none o' the tricks of them ordinary mesmerizing people. She just said 'Get up.' Same as if she was calling Miss Mary. You've got to believe in things as plain as that; no hanky-panky about them at all. And I must give my sister a chance too."

Astley groaned. Short of muzzling this woman there was no way of keeping her mouth shut, and he could not muzzle her. Besides she was essential to Mary's comfort after years of excellent service.

"Oh, we'll discuss it to-morrow," he said, going past to his room.

As for Esther, she sat silent all the way home in the dog-cart, quite tired out. The strain of the last two nights had been too much for her not very robust constitution, and she felt incapable even of thought as she slipped out of the purple gown, leaving it in a heap on the floor. She would not have minded that night whatever had happened —one of those fits of complete exhaustion to which she had been subject from a child had overcome her and she felt neither triumph nor hope—only an absolute dead blank where nothing mattered.

The next day she was rested, and went out to superintend the putting in of the granary stove, with a gradual-growing sense of power.

The work had been going forward all the previous day, and the very simple heating arrangement she had ordered from Shelton was completely installed by five o'clock. It was very cold in the granary, because the plaster was not

yet dry enough for a fire to be lighted, but Esther did not feel that as she walked up and down the long bare place or sat for a little while on the oak chair; she was too intent on her plans to notice anything outside.

The question worrying her was that of payment. How was she going to manage that? She must be paid, because money meant power—attention—all she was trying for—but she must not demand her fee like a quack doctor, or the whole scheme would be degraded to a lower level than she was ready to stand upon; her ambition expanded as she paced there in the dim candlelight, and seemed to show gigantic things before her in those dim corners which, as a child, she had peopled with the creatures of her imagination.

This Message of hers should appeal, not to the evil in every one, but to the good; because there is so much more good than evil in human nature. She'd cry out to that vague want in every human soul for something better, and a cry would answer her. She stood quite still, little and brown, in the circle of the candlelight, and heard the familiar sound of passing feet once more upon an empty road. She could fancy they were the footsteps of thousands thronging towards her from all the ends of the earth. All who craved to be noble, to be well, to be happy—she'd call out to them and they would answer. It was an adventure worth waiting for, worth living for, worth dying for——

Ah, she'd always wanted to do something great, but the magnitude of this intoxicated her. It had grown so imperceptibly of itself that she did not realize at first the

immense possibilities, but now they began to stretch in front of her until she wanted to cover the eyes of her mind.

Then she heard Jane Burdock's voice in the yard, and that brought her back to the practical side of the affair once more.

How was she to get paid ?

She glanced down at the plain wooden table where a pamphlet lay that she had been reading, relating to one of the many recently formed sects for the cultivation of the mind, and an idea came to her, at once simple and dignified. A plan by which the money would flow in automatically without her ever touching it—without her seeming to be interested in it at all.

She would write a pamphlet too, and make an exorbitant charge for it. At the end she would plainly state that only those who brought this book with them, and were entered on a register as having purchased it, could come to her for treatment. Each individual cure must be aided by a constant perusal of this work. And those who were treated must pay a thank-offering to the Society.

Esther saw it would be wiser to call it a Society, that left more scope.

"The Society of Hearers."

Her constructive brain had it all in order, now that she was inevitably committed. She could not go back now, even if she would, the way back was sealed up for ever.

She was *The Messenger*.

She heard Aunt Burdock's good-bye shout and remembered that night when she sat in the little chapel and first

realized that she, too, had the gift of holding an audience. It was the first time she ever dreamed of the conscious power within her taking that form, and the memory of it, even, seemed an immense way off. She saw the Esther Moor who sat in that pew through the wrong end of the telescope, and it made the little brown girl look pitifully small and of no account. The present Esther felt spurred by that backward glance to increasingly fresh effort. She would never look to the world like that again, she'd go on if she saw the mouth of Aunt Burdock's hell open before her.

She sat down and began to write rapidly in an old exercise book, the words came to her as they had done ever since she got into the story.

"THE MESSAGE."

That was the beginning. Underneath she wrote in the direct language which was natural to her, with no straining after effect, only a convincing plainness which was the germ of her success.

"I have a message to give, and how I give it does not matter, so that you understand. I have found that the shepherds who heard the Angels' voices at Bethlehem only did what any pure-hearted man or woman may do, if they are so gifted. But all have not the power, perhaps very few, perhaps none but myself, though I say this in all humility. For the physical ear must be attuned as well as the mental hearing, and it may be that in the scheme of creation this is not yet permitted. The gift may have been vouchsafed to me alone, not because I am more

worthy, but because of circumstances which we none of us could comprehend if we were told them.

"I can only relate facts as they occurred."

Esther then went on to tell the story of New Year's Eve, giving Mary's name and permission to apply to her and the maid for confirmation. And in conclusion she said:

"Are you suffering? Is any one dear to you in pain? I may have a message for you if I only knew your name and could concentrate my thoughts on you as I did on my friend Mary Astley. But you must remember that only those who are living good lives, and are striving for purity of thought and word, can expect an answer. Those under treatment must fix their mind on the Divine Voices at times to be arranged by me, especially at night and in solitude. But I cannot undertake to cure every one who comes to me. I may have a message for them or I may not. I can only faithfully impart that which is delivered to me."

She sat back in the chair after it was finished, staring at the jumble of lies and truth before her. A look that was almost sinister came into her eyes as her thoughts went across the world, seeking those she was going to befool.

Well—the world had given her nothing—all she received she had to *get*—she didn't care.

The old excuse that came to her lips in that granary when she was a child, came to her heart now she was a woman:

If her world had given her the appreciation she hungered for, it would never have come to this—if it had been to

her instead of to Nellie that all the admiration and chocolates were given——

But it was too late to think of that now, and she would do no harm to any one; nothing but good to all who were influenced by her. She would set before them a noble ideal; show that goodness and health went together—and gain fame and fortune for herself and the adulation she had always craved.

It was with this prospect in store that she blew out the candle, crept down the granary steps in the moonlight, and went into the house.

The Pobsons had dropped in, and sat comfortably round the fire with Nellie and Mrs. Moor; she caught sight of them talking together as she passed the window. But when she opened the room door and went in there was a sudden lull, during which Mrs. Moor began to make quick nervous remarks about the weather, and Mrs. Pobson replied vaguely with round eyes on Esther as if expecting to see she had grown different in the night. Mr. Pobson got up, rubbed the back of his head, and said it was time they were going.

Esther came forward and tried to appear just the same as she had always been, but it was no use. She had put herself outside of pleasant homely things like that gossip over the fire with the Pobsons, and must remain outside. But she suddenly felt how horribly lonely it would be.

No one mentioned the scene at the ball on New Year's Eve, or at the Astleys' the night before, though Esther knew they had been talking about it; and Mrs. Pobson kissed her gingerly, as if doubtful whether she wouldn't

"go off," unless handled with discretion. Mr. Pobson was so sorry for Mrs. Moor having a plain lass that had turned out to be a sort of witch too, that he walked off without saying good-bye to any one.

After the little bustle of departure there was a sort of constraint, and Esther felt impatiently powerless to break through it.

Then there was a fresh sound of opening and shutting doors, and Stallard was ushered in.

"Ned's gone round to Miss Burdock's," he said, "so I came on alone, because I could not wait to say how I congratulate you, Mrs. Moor, on your daughter's success. It is a wonderful gift, a wonderful career opens out before her. One can't see the end of it."

Instantly the constraint loosened. What had been impossible with the Pobsons came most easily now.

"You're very good," murmured Mrs. Moor, quite overcome; and Esther said, with an assurance she had never shown before:

"I hope to be an influence for good—my aim is just to increase happiness—that's all."

A sudden shrewdness focussed Stallard's open gaze, then he was himself again, candid, free, a clear pool for all men to gaze into.

"That's all life's made for. It's noblest end. It's perfect satisfaction," he said. "To be true to the light within you—upright—pure—that is the one thing worth living for! The true-hearted shall inherit the earth."

Joy flowed over Esther's wounded egotism in a stream of healing. She was in the right place at last—the centre

—the magnet of people's thoughts and attention. It was a moment before the actual words reached her understanding, and the last phrase had a word in it that she vainly tried to pass over.

The true-hearted.

Her mind groped.

"What had that to do with her?"

Like a clap of thunder came the reply:

"Nothing."

Her mind, the Burdock mind, would go on speaking the truth in spite of the story she had made.

"I hope you are making plans for enlarging your sphere of usefulness," said Stallard.

"Yes," said Esther dully. But after a pause, the pleasure of being referred to by the man whom she had always longed to impress, banished all other thoughts, and she went on:

"I want your help, if you will give it me. I have been preparing a pamphlet for sale to those who wish to consult me, and it ought to be printed at once."

"Oh, well, that is quite in my line," said Stallard. "Shall we go over it together, then I can take it back to Lowport with me to-night and get it in hand at once."

Esther glanced round at her mother, sitting expectant and proud, but rather uncomfortable.

"We'll go into my chamber," she said.

"Esther," said Mrs. Moor, "I really can't allow that." She felt the great mission was carrying her daughter too far. "When you wish to speak to people in private you can

always have this place, there is no need to ask gentlemen into your bedroom."

Esther flushed.

"I mean the granary, of course, mother. I'm going to call it that now. I never thought of asking Mr. Stallard into my bedroom."

"If you had, I should not have misunderstood," said Stallard gravely, opening the door for Esther to go out.

Nellie went to the window and watched them cross the yard with a puzzled look on her face; Stallard seemed so taken up with Esther, that he had scarcely spoken to her. And that night at the ball he had *almost* proposed.

She sighed a little and went to see about warming some mince pies; Stallard was particularly fond of hot mince pies.

CHAPTER IX

TOWARDS the end of January Nellie was coming out from Lowport after a day's marketing, when two women got into the train at a side station still within the suburbs of the city.

"There!" said one, "I'm glad to get into the train. Should ha' gone by the last, but I wanted to see my niece that's come over from Shelton for her holiday. She lives with the Astleys—Astleys the corn merchants—our master sells his corn to 'em."

"Ay, I know Astleys'," said the other woman, one of the silent sort.

"And you'd never believe the tale I heard there—never!" continued the first woman. "I wouldn't myself if I hadn't heard with my own ears. Talk about miracles! Why, there's that gell of my sister's that's been suffering from St. Vitus's dance for months, as quiet as you or me. All done by word of mouth. Not a drop nor a bite of nothing. It fair caps me. Then Miss Mary Astley's cured after lying i' bed for two years or more."

"Who done it?" said the second woman after a pause, not at all excited. "I heerd tell there was a man going about with some pills that——"

"Pills!" cried the first woman. "It isn't a pill, it's

bookstall, but it's"—she hesitated—"it's very dear. Ten shillings, you know."

"Yes, it's dear," said Susan's aunt, "but I shall get it."

She felt vaguely convinced of its mysterious power, because she had to give so much more for it than it was worth, and because her sister's family said it was "above them." If it had been cheap and intelligible they would not have reverenced it at all.

"There was the Spiritualists—they see'd as well as heerd," announced the other woman slowly. "A lady I lived sarvent with was one. She died i' the York Asylum."

"But this is something quite different," said Nellie quickly. "It is to make people nobler—better—to help them to have faith—that's all."

"T'owd Bible's good enough for me," said the woman, gathering up her baskets as the train slowed down. "Good night, all."

Susan's aunt got out a station farther on without making more than a desultory remark or two, for Nellie sat silent and unapproachable in her corner. She was overwhelmed by a sort of pained uneasiness which she could not explain to herself at all.

At Shelton station, every one had to alight because it was the terminus, and Nellie was groping in the railway van to find a small parcel which might have been put in there, when she heard Stallard's voice behind her.

"Can I help you?"

"No. Yes. I've a parcel in the van," she said, startled to find the person so near whom she had been thinking of day and night ever since she saw him last.

"I want to see the carrier. Is he there?"

"He is on the platform," said Stallard, never moving his eyes from her face, so blooming and flushed between the dark fur of her collar and her velvet hat. "I'll tell him to look out for your parcels and bring them along—and these small ones too," he said, taking those she carried.

She did not like to say she was going to carry those because every parcel, large or small, was twopence by carrier. So they walked out of the station together, Nellie with her hands in her muff and her feet tapping briskly on the hard ground. A little stream of men with collars up and bags in their hands went down the wide street leading to Shelton village, but by the time Nellie and Stallard reached the corner the last one had hurried on. A faint glint of the sea appeared at the end of the road, the moon was rising, and the waves made a monotonous booming.

"Good night," said Nellie. "That's your way, isn't it? I suppose you're lodging at Mrs. Brown's still."

But Stallard was not listening—he was struggling against his desire to walk back to East Fallows with her, for he too remembered how that night at the dance he proposed—almost—and he was determined not to marry her. He must have money.

Nellie looked with anxious eyes into his perturbed face. Poor fellow, he was worried; she felt so sorry.

"Have those tiresome committeemen been worrying you again?" she said.

He glanced up then and saw the sweet outline of her

cheek in the dusk, just lighted by the gas-lamp across the road.

"Nellie, let's go round by the sands," he said. "It's low tide now, and the sands are as hard as a board to walk upon."

"They'll be expecting me. It takes half an hour longer," she hesitated.

"Oh, you can make some excuse," he said. "After all, life doesn't offer so many perfect things that we can afford to refuse one of them. And a walk by the sea, on a night like this, with the moon just rising—and somebody you like walking with—Nellie?"

She turned round and moved in the direction of the sea.

Just as they came to the last gas-lamp, where the hush and loneliness of the shore on a winter's night started, they met Astley. He was coming along rather slowly and wearily, and passed them with a "Good night." Then some idea seemed to strike him and he stopped short.

"Are you going round by the sands?" he said. "You'll find a lot of big stones near Dunholme Gap; it's bad walking."

"Oh, I'll take care of Miss Nellie," said Stallard unpleasantly. "You needn't trouble about that."

Astley took no notice of Stallard, and continued:

"The cliff path at Dunholme will be very slippery too—the gravel donkeys couldn't manage it yesterday, I heard."

"Well, we can, I hope," said Stallard with a short laugh. "Good night, Astley."

They went on again then, and soon even the sound of their own footsteps was lost on the quiet sand. Stallard did not speak; his emotions were gradually overpowering his worldly wisdom, and he was beginning to feel, as Astley had done, that every one wanted Nellie. The meeting with Astley had roused the fighting instinct in him, and he desired to secure her—to make her his own so that none of these other men could get at her.

But marriage was the only way.

Well, hang it, he'd marry her!

In the deep of his mind he knew that he would never do that, but he pretended to himself not to know it. He never liked to look ignoble to his own conscience, and it was so well trained that it modestly looked the other way when required.

The silence lasted so long that Nellie began to wish she had gone home by road. If he were bored by her why did he ask her to come? She walked fast, with her head up, feeling very miserable, and almost treading in the surf so as to leave a wide distance between them.

Then he slipped his hand within her arm.

"Are you trying to get your feet wet, you foolish little girl?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," said Nellie, with a total loss of her usual pleasant composure. "They're *my* feet. Surely I can do as I like with my own feet," and she twitched her arm away.

That finished Stallard's inward hesitation, he took her arm again and drew her to him.

"They're not your feet," he whispered between his teeth.

feet just above
shoes, while she stood half dazed w
ness, between the dark cliffs and the
The salt smell of the sea on a frosty
of the air, the absolute stillness sav
waves—these always meant someth
lived—they could never be just sea a
It was half-past eight o'clock, an ho
right time for getting home, when the
path at Dunholme Gap.

"Well, I shall not have to mak
said Nellie, smiling up at Stallard.
mother, and she'll understand."

All Mrs. Moor's children down to f
tralia felt that—She'd understand.

Stallard took his arm from about
her stand alone.

"No, dearest," he said, "we mus
must ask you to make a sacrifice fo
nobody to help me. I've got to mak
world, and I can't possibly think

be your love-token to me. All the love and devotion of my life shall be my gift in return. Nellie—darling." He had her in his embrace once more now and she was crying a little. But no sweet woman ever lived who could withstand the opportunity to sacrifice herself for her lover, and Stallard knew that he had gained his point.

"I'll say you missed your usual train, and I brought you home as it was so late," he added, when they stood at the top of the cliff, a little breathless after their slippery climb.

"Very well," said Nellie rather flatly. It was one thing to see sacrifice as a glorious whole, and another to see the mean little details, and even the first glamour of love was unable to give a lie in a pleasant aspect. She hated lying, not particularly because it was wrong, but because it was so nasty.

"That's my own noble little sweetheart," said Stallard, greatly relieved. He began to feel already what a fool he had been. What was he to do with her? Then a strand of her loosened hair blew across his face and he ceased to care about the future—he ceased to remember anything but Nellie's warm, flushed cheek beneath that strand of hair.

When they went into the sitting-room where a big fire was burning, Nellie put her muff up to her flushed face as Stallard made the explanation.

"It was kind of you to come all this way with Nellie," said Mrs. Moor, upon whose blind side Stallard was securely settled. Her shrewdness was quite disarmed towards

dawning suspicion from Stallard to h

"You had better go up and take

said, rather severely.

Esther sat by the writing-table w

spondence before her, and had take

Stallard than to wish him "Good e

up to her now and began to discuss

Message" publication in a voice whi

Mrs. Moor. Mr. Moor sat by himse

reading, and mending broken crocke

Even when Nellie, very tidy, but

now, came into the room, he did no

went to her usual corner and began t

that would let the cotton slip, until th

in the supper tray, and Mrs. Moor m

tion for her benefit.

"I've scarcely ever known you mis

she said. "I suppose the carrier ha

you do about your parcels?"

"Oh, they're coming all right,"

"Hi—hi!" she shouted after the carrier's retreating back. "What train did them parcels come from?"

"The six twenty-seven," replied the man. "I don't meet none later than that at this time o' year. So long."

"So long," replied the housemaid, without any of her usual *espièglerie*. Then she turned to the kitchenmaid. "There. I guessed as much when I saw her shoes. She's been trapsing about on them sands with Stallard for two hours or more, and now sits in a corner looking like a mouse, and him sucking up to Miss Esther that we thought he was after first. I can't make head or tail of it. He's a rum 'un, is that Stallard, though he is always jawing about living noble lives, and everybody being happy. He talks beautiful. I'll own that. But what's he up to now?"

"Oh, I dunno," said the kitchenmaid, who was suffering from toothache and oblivious to romance for the time being.

"Bell again," said the housemaid. "Oh, I forgot the butter," and she went in demurely with the butter-dish.

Esther and Stallard were still by the writing-table, but Nellie came to the tray and began cutting the plum bread and cheese. She looked very tired now, with shadows round her eyes and pale cheeks. As Stallard got up to help her, he felt a sudden impulse to put his arm about her and tell them she was his promised wife. He felt, as he watched her bending over her household task, that she was meant for nothing less than open love and reverence. All the best in him rose to worship her, but unfortunately the

a germ that he didn't create and
which rendered the best in him the

For a moment he stood gazing at
persuaded; and that was his ch
possible redemption that comes t
no one living who has not been give

But it passed, and he carried a
without saying a word.

CHAPTER X

ON the following market-day Nellie came down in her out-of-door things ready to go to Lowport.

"It's a bad day," said Mrs. Moor, looking out of the window. "Likely to rain. Won't you wait until next week?"

"No, mother, I want some new stuff for a blouse."

"Is that all? Well, it adds two shillings on to the material: for your fare, you know. Hadn't you better write for patterns?"

"Oh, I think I'll go," said Nellie. "It's time I was off now. Good-bye."

"What train shall you come back by?" called Mrs. Moor after her. "You might catch the four-thirty."

"Don't know—perhaps the six," called Nellie back, running down the path to avoid further questions.

It was rather difficult to find anything to do in Lowport for so many hours, and Nellie watched the shops light up, and the slimy brown streets grow quite cheerful with the reflected yellow shine, before she went to the station. Stallard had not been over to East Fallows since that wonderful afternoon, and could not write, of course, for fear of arousing suspicion, and she felt she must see him, though she had refused to meet him when he asked her.

had given up hope, when Stallard
carriage.

"I had a rush to get off," he said, "
a hair's-breadth." Then, as the tra
platforms and the passengers could no
there, he came over to her side of the c
hand. He liked to wait a little while b
it gave him such an exquisite mome
tender down-bent face.

Nellie had almost begun to wonde
absence if it could all be real, but
of that now—it was the rest of life
now.

"Do you know," she said, after a
laugh, "I was quite miserable that
home. You seemed to forget me—an
with Esther's plans—I believe I was ac
she laughed again, just for pure ligh
because the idea of being jealous of
that moment so ridiculous.

she might have. Besides, my attention to her reassured your mother, who began to be a little suspicious."

"I wish we could speak out," sighed Nellie. "To keep it all secret is the hardest thing you could have given me to do, Paul."

"But, dear, don't you like to do the hardest thing for my sake?" asked Stallard. "And do you think I like deception any more than you?"

Nellie remembered with compunction that striking candour and openness of manner which was the first thing every one noticed in him; it was really that which had first made her like him. "Of course you hate all this secrecy *more* than I do," she said. "It's mean of me not to have considered that! I've only been thinking of myself."

"The sweetest thing in all the world to think of, dear," he whispered.

Then the train stopped and two girls got in, belonging to Shelton. So Stallard read the "Lowport News," and Nellie stared out of the blank window-pane where a most wonderful procession of Loves and Joys, all garlanded, took the place of telegraph wires. A continuation of the same wire, and the same exquisite vision of it, followed her on the way from Shelton to Dunholme, though she had to battle along by herself in a rising wind with a slight drizzling rain. Stallard said he might follow later, but would not walk back with her a second time for fear of arousing suspicion.

She reached home quite punctually, and sat down to the evening meal looking so gay and pretty that even Mr.

Moor noticed it, and said he'd never known roses grow in Lowport before—for he had the deepest dislike for his native town, and never went near it unless he was absolutely obliged. Ned came home always by an earlier train than Nellie had travelled on, so it was not knowledge which prompted the question:

"Did Stallard tell you he was coming out to-night?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered she, startled.

"I thought he might have told you in the train," bluffed Master Ned with a chuckle.

"You shouldn't think, it's a bad habit," said Nellie, rather tartly. Nobody likes being startled for nothing, and now she knew by his manner that he was "having her on," as he put it.

But Stallard did not come that evening, after all, though on Sunday afternoon he walked over as he had done very frequently since Ned first took him to the house. Poor Nellie's heart was growing a little sick with hope deferred when she heard the sound of the gate and the tramp of his feet up the garden path. The days were lengthening now, and it was still broad daylight, while the air was quite soft and smelled vaguely of primroses and violets, as it always does just before spring comes.

Nellie hoped they would go for a turn along the lane before tea-time, then perhaps Ned would go in, and they would have a word alone. She could not know, of course, that Stallard had determined after their journey together to keep away from the house entirely. This was the reason why he had not come the same night; but he chanced to be staying the week-end at Shelton with a friend, and when

he opened his window on Sunday morning and the soft air rushed in, with the smell of spring and the sea about it, the thought of Nellie became so close and near that he almost felt she must be beside him. Then he went down to breakfast with his host, and smoked, and had a long walk, and ate his Sunday dinner, and thought how strong and wise he was. "Best for you and best for me," was the burden of the speech he prepared during that day for the time when Nellie demanded an explanation. He felt quite determined to get out of it. What a fool he'd been ever to get in!

After dinner he and his friend smoked again, and talked politics, for which purpose the invitation had been given and accepted. But as the afternoon wore on the vision of a Government-supported paradise became fainter, and dreams of Nellie, as she looked against a dusky sky, became more insistent. The absolutely upright and most sincere gentleman in broadcloth who entertained him grew to be an unmitigated bore instead of a pillar of support, and Stallard went so far as to answer testily some suggestion for providing the agricultural poor with free literature.

"Better see they're given a chance to live first," he retorted, going to the window. Then he saw the purple hue of annoyed importance on his host's face, and added: "Of course I'm with you in that. You mustn't mind my blunt way of speaking. I'm a straight sort of chap, you know, and must say what comes into my head, without stopping to think if it suits. That's the worst of being a north-countryman."

to die.

Stallard was glad of that, but he
gentleman in broadcloth, and was
must see Nellie. He would break off
when the big political meeting in Lo
he must leave it until then or he wou
at all; in the meantime she might le
he never went near her, for she wou
him this afternoon, and—and——

And in fact a thousand reasons were
go to her because he could not stop aw

So the East Fallows gate clicked, and
the path, and he went into the room
as usual; but when he suggested a wa
too, and talked about the spring con
Vicar of Shelton, and the wonderful cu
until Nellie was nearly crying with di
impatience, and Stallard disliked Mrs.
time, though she had plainly no idea
rid of her.

At last

to her about a suggestion I have received, respecting a lecture to be held in Lowport. I think it would be a good thing to widen her sphere of usefulness. Will you excuse me a moment?"

He drew a long breath of relief as he went up the steps, for Mrs. Moor's placid presence had chafed his excited nerves almost past bearing.

When he went into the granary and closed the door behind him, he had a sudden sense of entering repose. Esther sat on the big chair with her pen in her hand, and her dark hair, pale face, and purple gown were illuminated by the skylight from above like a Rembrandt picture against the dusky shadows of the large bare place.

He realized her power for the first time as she looked across at him, all her forces made active by purpose instead of being stultified by want of it; and he saw how she would dominate those who came under her influence, though he knew she could never dominate him, because she had made him certain of her. He had suspected almost from the first that she was ready to love him, and looked on it as the ridiculous, necessary tribute to his charm; so many women were taken with him—but now he knew she loved him. There had been no time to hide the self which was so wont to appear in Esther's face, so difficult to hide, and she sat there with her secret heart illumined for him in the midst of the dim room, before she had time to throw the mantle of self-consciousness about her.

A moment later she said quietly:

not the Power which might creep t
hold tight where it once had gra
always going to be like that with
became—and he saw her becoming
and rich and great—she would ren
Esther Moor who had wanted hi
her.

It was curious how the recolle
him would keep in the foreground
was telling her about the prospect o
of Hearers, and those who might bec

"But I don't suppose there are mo
in the world who believe in my te
"I am only beginning to shape it in n
first nebulous form. The Message I
so unexpected, that I did not all at on
of delivering it. I thought at first
the open sky that I could hear the
I can hear them anywhere by liftin
listening. My ear and heart have

"Shall you teach others to hear too?" he said abruptly; his interest in the matter was becoming acute, though he could not tell himself why this was the case.

"Yes," said Esther. "I shall train other messengers to carry out my work. Mary Astley, I think, will be one. She is marvellously altered; you wouldn't know her. She was always very intelligent and spiritual, now she has got a motive power she will do great things, as those highly nervous people often do."

That odd interest at the back of Stallard's mind, which he would not formulate, prompted him to ask another question.

"But you can do nothing in these days, even in spiritual things, without money, and these pamphlets wont bring in any really large sum. How are you going to manage about funds?"

"Well," said Esther, "that is a difficulty. I'm not clever about money matters, not because I couldn't be, I think, but because I've had very little experience. And I see that the money side of the Hearers' Society ought to be well organized from the start. There ought to be no muddles."

"You must have wealth if you're to have the power to spread your wonderful message as it should be done," said Stallard.

"I don't intend to proselytize," said Esther.

"You won't need to," Stallard replied. "Hold before the people what they've been craving for since the dawn of civilization—health and happiness—and they'll follow.

"I myself," he continued, "feel
come a Hearer. To catch at any fly
Esther rose abruptly from her sea
"Don't," she said.
"But I've not much hope in any
the change it has made in you," h
raised you—raised you."
Esther watched him silently, then
with her hands and broke into bitte
came up from the yard below.
"Esther, Esther, it's tea-time."
"Go now," said Esther.
"Shall I tell them you're busy?"
"Tell them what you like, so lon
Esther, walking away from him into th
Down in the sitting-room, the pa
table all seemed conscious of constr
Moor, who had a cake dish in front o
mended that he glowed with the satis
in the presence of his masterpiece

"Oh, very well," said Mrs. Moor, glancing rather doubtfully from him to Nellie.

So Stallard carried the tray without a man's usual awkwardness—he never was awkward—and Nellie watched him go by the window, wondering rather wistfully how it was that Stallard could do things for Esther without compromising her, while he was so very careful with his sweetheart. But she came to the conclusion it was because Esther was 'different.' She had always been 'different' from a little girl.

When Stallard reached the granary door he found it locked, and for some time could get no response to his knocking; at last Esther let him in.

"Your tea is nearly cold," he said, without looking at her red eyes. "Now sit down and let me pour out for you."

He pulled her chair forward, and as he did so chanced to touch her hand.

"There—sit down," he said. Then he took her cold hand and chafed it gently. "Poor little woman, it's hard work doing big things, or even planning them," he went on. "Now, drink some of the tea and have a bit of bread-and-butter."

This first personal service from the man she loved was as sweet to Esther as it is to all women, warming her to the very heart. She ate the bread-and-butter and drank the tea with little catchings of the breath and tearful smiles, like a child who had been hurt but is happy now.

"Well, I must go back to the others," said Stallard after a while. "I wanted to remind you about the cost

a penny in the bank. Perhaps
dock——"

"No," interrupted Esther, "
one thing, Aunt Burdock would
into the Humber. And don't yo
you've done enough to help me al

But her brave words were not s
was left alone in the chamber wi
Mary—she thought of Mary, bu
simply couldn't take advantage o
to give her anything. It seemed
she had never asked money from
she was grown up, and never w
thousand little pinches which wo
that fifty pounds if she asked her r
—last summer's bonnet—baking-p
stead of eggs. No, she couldn't d

Still—there was no one else.
stop, when it was just at the mome
if she could not get that fifty

which stirred the heavy air of Lowport at this time. Tired eyes gazed through the fog and grime towards the city of perfection, and some saw an altar there for the Society of Hearers. For the inherent goodness of men leads them always to set up a fresh altar for every one thrown down, and you never know to what strange god it will be.

Esther sat on there, looking in the dark which closed around her, and seeing visions that would intoxicate the sanest brain. What struck her most, was, not how difficult it seemed to create a new religion, but how marvellously easy. She almost began—sitting there in the dark—to feel as if she really *were* higher and greater than other people. The poison of her draught of notoriety was working now, and she began to have the morbid admiration for herself that is the invariable after effect. She felt that her mind must be greater than other minds, or she could not cure the sick.

She had to create a visible theory to account for this power, so as to reach her public; but she felt no longer that it was a lie to say she was *The Messenger*, because she did bear a message of healing. Her adventure did no harm to mankind—only good—though Lavington——

With that name her inflated thoughts fell on the bed rock of fact, but a possible solution of the money difficulty rose up directly afterwards; she lit the lamp and drew pen and paper towards her.

"Dear Mr. Lavington," she wrote, "I am in most desperate need of fifty pounds and have no one in the world to whom I can go for it but you. Will you lend it

to me for a year? At the end of that time I promise faithfully to pay it back if I am alive.

"Always yours sincerely,

"ESTHER MOOR.

"P.S.—Will you please *telegraph* the money if you do let me have it."

Then she addressed it to Helwān, where he was still staying, and ran with it, bare-headed, to the post-box at the bottom of the lane.

As she approached the garden there was a low sound of voices, and she fancied somebody slipped into the wet summer-house; but when she reached the gate everything was quite silent, so she thought it was imagination. She had always been a little apt to see and hear more than there was.

"Mr. Stallard's been gone about twenty minutes," said her mother when she entered the room.

"Oh," answered Esther. Then, as she did not wish to speak of Stallard, she added, for something to say: "Where's Nellie?"

"Upstairs, changing her frock," said Mrs. Moor.

After that Esther sat silent by the fire, very tired; but she never connected Nellie's continued absence with Stallard's, because thoughts of herself so filled her mind now that she had almost forgotten to be jealous. Stallard scarcely took any notice of Nellie when he came in these days; she thought his admiration must have been just one of those passing fancies which her pretty younger sister inspired in most men who visited at the house.

Esther looked back to the passion of bitterness in which she had spent New Year's Eve with a sort of wonder.

She was no more little Esther Moor, dowdy, overlooked; but a woman, with a sense of growing power that is like nothing else on earth, and the respect and attention of the man she loved.

She thought how good he was, how noble, how splendid, and all sorts of phrases he had spoken occurred to her as she sat there by the fire, warm and a little drowsy after the emotions of the day. And every phrase, nearly, had something in it about truth and happiness. The recurrence of that word, truth, almost jarred on her as she felt herself slipping into sleep. Then she sat up in her chair. Truth! Sleep would not come to her after all, though she was so satisfied.

CHAPTER)

MISS BURDOCK drove into the
farm, but did not alight from

"Agnes—Agnes!" she shouted, u
off the granary roof. "Are you all
o'clock in the morning? Ag—nes!'

The concluding bellow brought M
the door with a serviette in her hand.

"We're late this morning, Jane.
"It's a long time since you were here.'

"No. I won't come in. But I wan
business of Esther's. So long as she
me I left her alone; she isn't my dau
to say! But I won't have her medd
She's been getting hold of Tom Dixon
and nerves, and wants backbone g
he's really ill, and won't have the
interferes with the Message—Rah—

thrashing. I'll do it myself if she doesn't keep out o' my way."

"I can't hear you talk like that, Jane," said Mrs. Moor. "You know Esther is sincere. Have you ever found her anything else?"

"Yes," said Miss Burdock bluntly. "She used to make up all sorts of tales when she was a child. I remember finding her in the granary half frightening the life out of Nellie. Why, I can see her now as if it was yesterday. Her hair falling down and those yellow eyes staring. She hasn't started anything new. She's only just gone on. You ought to have stopped it in time."

"I always understood Esther," said Mrs. Moor, a mother's pride making her anxious face very pleasant to look at.

"So did I," snapped Miss Burdock. "And I've no quarrel with you, Agnes—never should have—but I shan't come here again until she gives up this nonsense. How can I stand up and preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ if I'm countenancing my own niece in such ways as hers are. She makes out she's had a further inspiration than there is in the Bible, and I call it rank blasphemy."

"Hush, hush, Jane. You ought to feel honoured that the new teaching, which a different age has made needful, has been given through your niece. I always felt she was marked out for some special destiny. Why, I've told you hundreds of times that I knew she was meant for something great. It was an instinct—an inspiration. I feel," she added in a low tone, "unworthy to be the mother of one who will influence the future of the world."

"Do you?" said Miss Burdock, gathering up the reins with her big face purple under the odd-shaped hat. "Well, I don't feel unworthy to be her aunt. Quite the opposite. I'm ashamed of her. Gee-up, mare! And mind, if she tries to treat my labourers again she'll hear about it. I won't have it."

She drove off without any farewell, and Mrs. Moor went indoors to find her daughter.

"Perhaps, dear, you'd better tell Tom Dixon to have a doctor," she suggested when she had delivered a mild version of Aunt Burdock's message.

"I can't do that, mother," said Esther. "It is a case I am quite fitted to deal with by myself, and any other suggestion would only interfere with the power of mine. I am sure he will recover. It is only lack of will-power he is suffering from; his mind will learn to control his body so soon as his faith is strong enough."

"How is old Mrs. Morris going on?" said Mrs. Moor.

"Badly," said Esther. "Her mind is so clogged and clouded, and she takes Wilson's pills at the same time. She won't throw herself entirely on the divine message. But, mother, you know I've asked you not to speak to me about my work. It isn't that I don't want your sympathy, but—Oh, mother, *don't* do it. Go on living just as if it had never happened."

"I can't forget how glad and proud I feel," said Mrs. Moor with a tremulous smile.

"No," said Esther, kissing her. "That's the best of it. That's the best of it. But don't *say* anything. And—and mother."

"Yes, dear?"

"I don't want you and Nellie to come to the meeting. I must have all my power and self-control there, and if I saw you sitting, watching me, wondering——"

Mrs. Moor was disappointed, but that didn't matter; of course what was best for Esther had to be.

"Then we'll stay at home," she said quickly. "But there'll be nobody of your own there, because your father and Ned won't go."

Esther drew a long breath.

"I'm glad," she said. "It's best so. You don't mind, do you?"

"Oh, no, not a bit," cried Mrs. Moor, as such mothers will. "We shall be at home thinking of you."

But she dropped a tear in the egg and milk she was beating up for Esther, all the same, for she would have loved to see her faith in her daughter justified before the world. But Mrs. Moor's family had a vague impression she was never hurt because she never cried out.

During the next few days Stallard came over once or twice about the meeting, in spite of the fact that he was, for once, up to his eyes in other sort of work; and he pulled the strings which moved the Lowport Corporation at this juncture so cleverly that the Mayor promised to preside. A paragraph appeared on that in the "Lowport News," saying how broad-minded the Mayor was, and how ready to aid and abet any seekers after light, which pleased all who chanced to be at variance with the recognized religious bodies, and made the Corporation feel

itself soaring into regions where the small distinctions of creed remained no longer visible. Esther's theory became finally identified with that movement which regards every man divine and answerable to nobody, and those who did not in the least want to hear about The Message promised to go as a sign of their open-mindedness and independence of thought.

Really everything seemed to go well; for just as the want of ready money looked like becoming a real stumbling-block, Lavington's telegram arrived, stating:

"Have wired my lawyer to send you fifty pounds in notes."

Next morning the five ten-pound notes arrived; Esther posted four of them to Stallard at once, and after that all was plain sailing. There was to be no charge for admission, of course, but a general air about the whole thing of doing simply what one could for the good of the world without regard to any financial reward, though one might insist, as it were, on bestowing itself.

When Esther got up on the morning of the appointed day she felt physically sick with nervousness; her teeth chattered as she dressed, though it was the end of February now, and not very cold, and her great mass of hair was dank and lifeless as she fastened it up with shaking fingers.

A sort of panic overcame her.

Should she wire to Stallard that the meeting could not take place? Should she go back to bed and refuse to move or speak or to give any explanation to any one? Then she heard her mother's voice outside.

"Esther, I've brought you a cup of tea."

"Please put it down, mother," said Esther, controlling her voice. "I'll take it in, in a minute."

She waited until her mother's steps retreated, and opened the door to find a tray and a letter from Stallard. So she drank the hot tea, and tore open the letter with fingers that began to grow steadier.

"Dear Miss Moor," it ran, "every possible arrangement is now made, but I should advise you to arrive at ten minutes past eight instead of at the exact time, and to walk quietly up the room and on to the platform. The first note of simplicity would thus be struck, and the message of truth needs no stage management. We've had enough of that in the past. Now we want simple reality. The Chairman is lending you his motor in which to return home after the meeting.

"I can't say much, because I feel so much, but I think you know how deeply glad I am to be associated with you in this effort to bring more happiness to that Brotherhood of Common Men for which I live.

"Yours ever,

"PAUL STALLARD."

As Esther finished the letter her shivering ceased, and her fingers grew firm and warm. No matter if she sinned against that truth which was the watchword of Stallard's career—no matter if he had been tricked by a lie into honouring her—the fact remained that he did. Nothing could ever take away the memory of that letter from her. Every prick and wound that her feelings had sustained since childhood was made up for now. She had an un-

[illegible] as ordinary women b
candles of cottage dwellers do at tl
Vesuvius. Peaceful home-lights m
in a little place. How good it is tc
to love as Esther loved!

She would walk down to the stat
road by the sea, and when she reacl
she had a sudden impulse to take a t
place and escape all those waiting
Assembly Rooms. But the curious
and the pleasure of feeling she was
by little groups of people in the sta
held aloof, strengthened her failing r

"I have reserved a carriage for y
the station-master, approaching her.
me to do so when he was here yesterd

So she slipped into the train with a
surrounded and shielded her. She'
which would give her nothing, with t
possessed, and had wrested from it—
now to fight [illegible]

"I'm Miss Moor," she said, giving him her hat and cloak.

Then she walked up the broad central aisle to the platform.

She was not in the least nervous now, because, in the solitude of the railway carriage, she had begun to take up the threads of her story. The talk she was going to give here was no more wonderful to her, in that moment, than those old talks she and Charlie had together in Masterby Woods, where they saw the strange gnarled faces on the tree-trunks in the gloomy dimness. The Voices—when she once began to think of them, and imagine how she should impress her imaginations on some one else—became just as real to her as those faces had been; that is—awesomely real. More real than the actual things that could be seen and heard and tested.

The room was very full, and a little murmur of disappointment began to buzz through it as Esther went up the wide steps leading to the platform.

"Was *this* what they had come to see and hear?"

The Mayor rose in his gold chain at a whispered word from Stallard, and shook hands in the way mayors do towards the end of their year of office. He had not known quite what to expect, but he felt quite easy now in referring to Esther as "our young friend," and tried to put rather an air of inconsequence upon his own presence there. He had at any rate expected a fine woman, able to carry things off, and felt annoyed with Stallard; but he implied that this was an added proof of his readiness to lend an ear to any scheme however improbable for benefiting

Esther in the quiet village, where
amongst her neighbours without a
to the great world beyond. She
to her the Truth, and with simple c
it to those who needed her. She
her convictions upon any one, an
suasion had he induced her to co
of Lowport. But they were his b
his native place, and he wanted to g
hear what he had heard. He had
to come amongst them without a
as she went from her home to a hou
and he ventured to think this was n
were true it needed no sensational a
presentation. It was due to the
Lowport, whence Miss Moor's family
the Message plainly and straightfo
strive to mislead them by platform t

The men of Lowport sat back in t
big; they were the arbiters. they

tree-folk real to Charlie and herself. She was not just Esther Moor, but the Messenger, in the wonderful tale she had to tell.

She stood there—so like her aunt Burdock, somehow, though there was no physical resemblance between them: but she had the same composure, the same confidence in her hearers' attention, the same sense of absolute power to reach something within those who listened, to which they must respond. That gift of dominating an audience is one which transforms quiet men and women while they are employing it. They are quite different from their normal selves, and all thought and care and love and hate are submerged in the one obsession—to reach the answering chord.

Esther inherited from her aunt, too, a carrying voice, which was not high-pitched, and yet could be plainly heard in every part of the building, without any appearance of speaking above her normal tone.

While she stood for a second, before starting, the people in the back rows began to talk, and Stallard felt she was done for. Why in the world didn't she begin? The noise grew to a loud, continuous buzz. The Mayor looked surprised.

"I am here to give you a message," said Esther at last, quite simply and plainly. "I was looking out into the sky on New Year's Eve when I heard Voices, telling me that the sick friend with whom I watched would be healed. We cannot adjust ourselves all at once to a revelation, and I tried to find some physical reason for my hearing this; but by patient experiment and long hours of soli-

tary thought, I have found out that the physical ear may have little to do with it. Any person may perhaps hear these Voices whose soul is attuned by meditation on this point, and made sensitive to spiritual influences, according to the rules I have laid down. Still, I want you to remember that there is a scientific basis for this idea. Many eminent scientists believe that the air is full of sounds —waves which we cannot distinguish. I know people who cannot hear the cry of a bat, though they possess otherwise perfect hearing, and that leads us to think of the millions of sounds there may be, just beyond the boundary of what we cannot understand. Why, the Unknown stretches before us when we think of that, so vast and full of sound that we cannot bear to picture it."

She lowered her voice, speaking with no eloquence, but just her usual bald simplicity, and the people in the back benches were quite quiet.

"While I am speaking, there may be Voices in this room to which my soul is not attuned to listen," she went on. "For I am sure the Voices speak to each alone. I have not yet discovered, nor do I expect to discover, a method by which it is possible for every one to hear the Voices for themselves. I feel honoured to know that the full revelation of the Voices beyond has been delivered through me, though I know there may be many others in this room who have the power within them, if they knew how to use it. I am only here, an ordinary woman, poorer than most of you, and with no learning or great name to help me; I am only here, to give my message to all who sorrow and toil and hope for better things."

She caught Stallard's eye and somehow the wings of her power dropped broken. Panic seized her. She put her hands to her throat with a sensation of choking. Not another word would come, and a hum of surprise began to rise from the audience: a flash of Aunt Burdock's genius forced her to gasp out:

"Hush! Listen! The Voices are speaking now. Oh! keep quiet and lift up your souls in listening."

Then, as she stood there, in the startled silence which followed, the strangest thing happened. *She really heard the Voices.*

Her face went very grey; then came a sobbing, triumphant cry from the end of the room, "I hear! I hear!" A man near the platform with a thin, work-worn face covered his eyes but said nothing. A girl rushed down the centre path, crying hysterically, and fell on her knees before the platform. "Thank God! Thank God! Now I know the meaning of all those strange sounds I hear in the night. They thought at home I was going mad, but I'm not—I'm most wonderfully sane."

"My friends," said Esther, speaking with difficulty, her hand on her throat, "we won't talk of these things now. Come to me at my home and we will talk of them together. I intend to hold little gatherings of Hearers for any who wish to train themselves to deliver the Message. But I feel sure all who do that must first learn of the Voices through me. I cannot talk to you any more now, because it has been a great strain to me to stand here. I could never have spoken at all but for the power that has

[illegible] down the steps and out c
with a maddening sense of fa
darkness and solitude.

But if she had planned it a
theatrical genius she could hav
for impressing the downright
her utter sincerity.

Stallard hastened after Esther
to the Mayor to explain that the
to them on another occasion, an
the stone vestibule into the stree
he touched her, then she started lil

"Let's get away!" she gaspe
failure."

"No, no," he said, "a living su
her into the motor.

It went slowly through the light
dim hedges began to fly past, and
silent. Esther lay back exhauste
brougham, but just as they pass
trees she [illegible]

she had heard what she was trying to make her audience hear. The obsession she was trying to force on them had seized herself.

"Of course you would hear," answered Stallard soothingly. "And your simple words and abrupt departure are an added proof of your sincerity. What did the Voices say?"

"Ah, I can't tell you," shuddered Esther. "But I would give my life, now, to stop hearing. I *must* stop hearing."

"Hush, dear," said Stallard, taking her hand. "You're overwrought. You have discovered a great truth, and the shock and strain have unnerved you. To-morrow you will be thankful again that the truth has been shown to you."

"The truth," Esther whispered. "Why—yes—it's the truth! And all night long whenever I awake I may hear the Voice again. I shall never be safe. Oh! if I could give back the key. If I could only feel quite sure of silence. I am so afraid of the night."

"Dearest," Stallard said, "give me the right to take care of you through the night; with my arms round you, you won't be afraid?"

For a moment Esther closed her eyes, the motor seemed to be charging through space amid a tumult of Voices; then she looked out, and there was the little hill on the road home with the one bent tree against a quiet sky.

"My love," she answered, and the moment seemed worth all the price. For though her fancy had grown real,

...se in the knowledge t

Mrs. Moor and Nellie stood
door as they went up the path.

"Well?" they cried.

"It's been splendid—splendi
thoughts," he answered.

For the first time since New Y
ease with Nellie and her mother.
this knowledge of the Voices, but a
on truth. She was not lying to he

Nellie went back into the room
Stallard paused with the others in t

"I've something else to tell you,"
so that Nellie could hear quite we
derful. Esther has promised to ma

He simply could not tell Nellie to
he could rely on her pluck after t
over.

"My dear, dear little Esther," s
the hall. "You've got every joy at
success and happi...

"I'm surprised, too," smiled Mrs. Moor. "But those nearest are often the blindest."

"Yes," said Nellie, looking Stallard straight in the face this time. "I'm afraid I have been rather blind."

Stallard's heart began to beat normally again; he had judged her aright.

"I must go," he said, "the motor's waiting," and Esther came out with him to the door.

"Good night, dear," he said, "think so much of me when you fall asleep that you don't hear the Voices. You can only stand a certain strain and must spare yourself if you are to continue your great work. Rest for to-night."

"Ah, if I can!" she answered.

CHAPTER XII

AFTER the first shock of finding that the creation of her own brain had become real, Esther began to experience a strange exaltation. It was infinitely more intoxicating to feel that she really had gone farther into the Unknown than any human being, than to make-believe ever so convincingly; and nothing is more marvellous than the ease with which a celebrity grows accustomed to a position above the crowd.

The time very soon came to Esther, as it does to all such, when the only noticeable fellow-creatures were those who did not notice her; they stood up like ugly warnings on the high road of success, and pointed back to that buried period before greatness arrived.

Esther could hardly realize that she once had come and gone with none caring, and she expected to see people draw together and whisper when she went past; to be ignored produced in her a sort of angry wonder. Could they know who she was?

Stallard ministered immensely to all this, and Esther's egotism, which had managed to keep furiously alive with no food at all, now grew beyond all bounds and ousted every other feeling but her passion for Stallard.

The Voices which spoke to her in the silence, and some-

times when she was in company, used the same phrases which she had coined herself, about love, and truth, and healing. But these phrases were often turned round in the mental confusion which her obsession produced in her, and the result was a curious vagueness of expression which seemed rather like nonsense to outsiders, but which the Hearers regarded as mystical, and the result of direct inspiration.

The odd inflation of the mentally unhinged caused Esther to pose naturally enough as one who has received a revelation. She believed herself the Messenger, now, just as truly as the poor lady in the country asylum believed herself the Virgin Mary, and moved and acted always in keeping with her supposed character. But, having started the scheme when she was evenly balanced, the foundations of it were laid in a common-sense practical way that already began to bring in a good deal of money.

Stallard was seriously considering the step of giving up all other work and devoting himself to the business management of the new creed, which spread with more rapidity the more incomprehensible it became; because people have a child's awe of what they cannot understand.

One day Esther was holding a class for the training of those who were to go out into the world and perform mental healing under her auspices, when she suddenly broke off and held up a warning hand; the same little brown hand that had worked so humbly and unsuccessfully, was uplifted now with an air of absolute command.

VOICES

"Hush," she said, "I feel the Voices are about to speak to me."

The long granary was bare and dim as ever, with Esther's chair under the skylight; and the Hearers sat on wooden benches before her. The steep stone steps leading to it were becoming the pathway to a shrine in the eyes of the little band who were taught by her. They believed in her with the same fanatical intensity with which she now believed in herself. The truth was none the less great, she felt, with that light-headed sense of exaltation, because she had stumbled on it through a false by-path.

"Hush," she said again. Then she closed her eyes. "I will now repeat what the Voices say to me. Write down my words and keep them for the generations to come."

There was a moment's intense pause, through which the cooing of the pigeons sounded, then, still with closed eyes, and in a low, monotonous tone, she began to speak, repeating herself endlessly in a sort of incantation.

"Truth is light.

There is wonderful light in Truth.

Light and Truth are the Essence of the Infinite.

In the Essence of the Infinite dwell the Voices of Revelation.

The Voices of Revelation bring healing to the body through the purifying of the soul.

Therefore in truth and purity is the Light of Infinite Life."

She drew a long breath and opened her eyes, fixing her intense gaze upon them.

"That is the Message."

Mary Astley, who was the Hearer nearest to her, got up and cried in a voice of ringing exultation:

"Our lives shall be given to carrying it through all the world."

Esther looked from one to the other, trembling and moved by what she felt to be an inspired utterance. She did not dream that it was the mechanical echo of ages of religious thought put into vague words under the influence of mania. The phrases she had just spoken seemed as real and wonderful to her as if a Visible Presence had delivered them.

Then one woman, sitting at the far end of the bench just in the shadows, began to cry hopelessly.

"I must go," she said. "I'm not worthy to receive the Message. I never have heard the Voices since that first night at Lowport."

For she was the woman who had called out from the back of the room at the meeting.

"Ah, it's the same with me," said Mary Astley, turning her nervous hands in her lap. "I can't hear the Voices either."

Esther got up and looked very solemnly at the two women.

"This is a point on which I have been thinking deeply," she said. "The revelation was so great, so strange—that at first I was bewildered. It was only by degrees that I saw quite clearly—but I think the full light has come to

me in this hour. I see that I alone have this great gift. I, only, can hear the Voices speak the actual words of the Message. In my humility I wished to assume that all the pure-hearted could hear as I did, but I see the time for that has not yet come, though the gradual perfecting of life will certainly bring it about. But now, my helpers, you will have to be content to take the Message from me and to feel, not to hear, when the Voices are speaking to you."

"How can we?" asked the woman, terribly in earnest. She wanted so something to hold on to, some hope, some living faith; surely this was not going to slip away from her.

"You can hear with the ears of the soul," answered Esther. "Live the abstemious life the Message ordains, until your soul becomes free, unclogged by the fumes of fleshly appetite, and then go into your own chamber; keep silence; and wait for an uplifting of the soul which will tell you the soul is listening to the Voices. Then, when you have learned to control your body through your mind, you can go forth and heal other bodies by the power of your strengthened and purified mind working in theirs through the Message."

"There's one difficulty I wanted to speak about—my brother does not like me to take money," hesitated Mary. "He has been very good to me, after all, though we don't live together now; and he can't bear to think of my doing this for money."

A cloud passed over Esther's face. She, too, was beginning a little to lose sight of the money question since

she had believed herself to truly hear the Voices; but Stallard showed her how absolutely necessary wealth was to power—and she must have power. She felt limitless power to be her sovereign right.

"Mary," she said, "you must not be selfish. The money does not matter to you, but I shall have many messengers, I trust, who must live by teaching the Message, and it would only create great difficulties if some refused their due reward. Any system to succeed must depend upon a workable financial basis, as Mr. Stallard rightly says; and I must consider the whole, not the individual. I must definitely forbid any one to treat without payment, for the sake of those who need the money, and for the sake of the cause to which part of the money is devoted. In the last stage of your teaching here, you will be able to undertake cases, and thus pay me the fee for the necessary certificate as a messenger."

"You're right," said a man with clear eyes and a high forehead. "I've got a mother to keep. I couldn't pay the fee unless I earned it, though I'd be ready enough to forgo it if I were able to do so."

He had a certain fluency of tongue owing to speaking at a debating society in Lowport, whose members thought it enlightened to cast off all old beliefs; but belief was a necessity to this man, and an intrinsic goodness led him towards the promise of good which the Hearers held out. His naturally refined ascetic temperament fitted in with their system of abstemious living, and he was an advanced pupil though a recent one. Stallard thought he would be able to lecture for the cause with the convincing simplicity

which Esther had originated; and she herself turned to him with consideration.

"Nobody doubts your will to work for nothing if you could," she said, "but that is neither necessary nor wise. Mary, you see now, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm very sorry," said Mary, crestfallen.

"You can, of course, employ the money earned in helping to build a place of worship later on," said Esther. "That will be our next undertaking, for we must have some visible standpoint in the world. But our hour is over for to-day; we will now fix our thoughts for a little while in silence on the Message, and then part."

After a few moments' quiet, Mary Astley placed the written words of the Message delivered that day upon the table before Esther, ready for copying into a book which was written up after each meeting; then the students went away without any farewell, down the little uneven steps of the granary and across the yard.

Esther sat in a sort of trance, in which the glory of the world seemed to unroll before her as the path up which she would walk to the Throne of the Revealer, and remain there for ever, set in an aureole of perfect knowledge. It was her hour of most intense exaltation, and when a heavy tread sounded on the stone steps outside she felt like a monarch into whose presence a subject enters unannounced.

She determined to allow Stallard to see that she was guarded from this sort of casual interview; for he had already suggested that she should be hedged about with a certain amount of ceremony.

VOICES

The door was unfastened; and it flew open noisily to admit Ishmael Dixon, Tom Dixon's father.

Esther rose. Near things had dwindled to almost nothing in the effulgence of that glory-light, and as she addressed this rough old man she only felt his increditable distance from her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

He came forward, without answering, until his grizzled face almost touched her across the table.

"I want my son," he whispered, "my son that's dead—you—murderer!"

For a moment Esther felt herself a helpless, sorrowful woman, falling—falling—but only for a moment. She glanced at the Message before her and immediately the old sense of her infallibility returned—she, enthroned on knowledge, lighted by truth, could make no mistakes.

"Your son died from want of faith," she answered. "Perfect faith is perfect health."

"Don't you dare say a word against my son now he's gone," cried Ishmael Dixon. "He got his head turned, poor lad, by them that knew more than he did, and ought to ha' led him right. Stallard and that crew took all he'd believed in away from him, and you give him this. He wouldn't have a doctor till it was too late, because he'd such belief in you, and when he was dying he kept raving bits of nonsense and then stopping short to listen to the pigeons in Miss Burdock's yard. They all seemed mixed up with——"

He broke off, and as the pigeons cooed above him the sullen anger deepened in his face.

"Them damned birds was here, then," he said. "Here—where you sit so calm and peaceful—and teach folks what drives them to their death. You're a witch. You'd ought to be burnt, burnt like the old witch of Danwick, in the old times. The death o' one to save the souls of thousands. My lad's to be buried in the churchyard; but what's his mother and me to put on his grave? That you've killed him?"

"Your own fears and want of faith helped to kill him," said Esther, with a desperate instinct to stab in a vital spot the man who was dragging her from the throne where her own diseased imagination had placed her. Sorrow and death grew very real with that tragic working face before her; she began to feel lost—on the verge of losing faith in herself. The cruelty of self-preservation made her brush past him and run towards the door without further words, but Ishmael was there before her.

"Is that your last word?" he said. "I came to you because I remembered you from a little lass—you, Miss Esther, that's been sorry allus for a dog that suffered; and I wouldn't condemn you without giving you a chance. I thought maybe you'd have something to say for yourself that I didn't know on—the missus and I did——"

Esther kept silence. Her face set like stone. Then he flung open the door.

"There—go!" he thundered.

Esther went slowly down the steps. The yard was quiet as ever but for the cooing of the pigeons. The sun set behind the empty buildings; the glorious sense of irrespon-

sibility which belongs to an unbalanced hysterical mind began once more to swell within her.

She walked once more apart from all sorrow and suffering in the light of truth.

It should be her message to teach all the world to do the same, she thought, as she looked towards the sunset. She felt the thrill go through her which heralded the Voices, and lifted up her soul to hear them chant:

"We know no pain. We know no sorrow. In perfect faith is perfect happiness."

CHAPTER XIII

THERE was a pleasant smell of baking bread in the Moors' kitchen, though it was still early, because the kitchen-maid wanted to go out that afternoon. The spring sun shone warmly across the yard, the wind was rising to half a gale, even the dead straws blowing seemed full of vigorous life.

The housemaid came down from the bedrooms with the dust-pan in one hand and a damp grey-white ball in the other.

"Look at that—that's what I find under Miss Nellie's pillow half the mornings—it 'ud melt the heart of a stone to see her so cheerful with her head up in the daytime and to know she's crying by herself at night. Sopping wet that handkerchief is."

"Cold in 'er 'ed," said the kitchen-maid, out of pure contradiction; she and the housemaid had had a trifling spar that morning early over the use of the looking-glass.

"It's no such thing," said the housemaid. "Miss Nellie hasn't got the least touch of a cold. It's"—she lowered her voice and spoke with solemn unction, "it's a broken heart. That's what it is."

"Wish I could chuck this at Stallard," she said, for-

getting the grievance of the looking-glass. "He's behaved like a regular skunk, he has, spooning with Miss Nellie in the summer-house for an hour by the clock—I catched sight of 'em going in and coming out—and next news he's engaged to Miss Esther."

The cook-kitchen-maid banged a bread-tin on the table and released a loaf.

"Whatever made him do it?" asked the housemaid. "Miss Esther's a real good sort, and before she got hold of this crazy business I thought a deal of her. But Miss Nellie's always been more of a gentleman's fancy."

"I know," said the kitchen-maid. "It's the coin. They tell Miss Esther 'll be making a fortune before long. I did think of trying her for my toothache, but it's gone off."

"Don't you," said the housemaid earnestly, "have no truck with them Hearers. Stands to reason that Miss Esther, as we've seen with toothaches and earaches and colds, and sitting about in old blouses taken no particular notice of, can't be turned all in a minute into a cross between a witch and a prophet. 'Tisn't sense. Mark my words, there's some humbug of Stallard's planning at the bottom of it."

"But she always was different," argued the kitchen-maid. "You must own that. She'd a way of looking at you."

"Well, and she's got thought something wonderful on the strength of that," retorted the housemaid. "On that, and the way she had of making you feel as if things

must be true because she said 'em. Miss Burdock's like that. I went to hear her preach last Sunday. It was against false prophets, and they seemed to think she was going for the Hearers and Miss Esther."

"Yes, Mrs. Moor and her isn't on speaking terms now. Nice ructions this new religion's made in the family. Look at Mr. Ned, he sits eating his tea when Miss Esther's there like a bear with a sore head. But I really do believe she hears something, don't you?"

"Yes," said the housemaid. "So does lots of folks, but they get locked up, they don't get made prophets on. Well—so long—I must go and finish the bedrooms."

She went off, and immediately after a step came to the door.

"There's no getting on this morning," muttered the cook, wiping her hands. "Well?" she said, flinging open the door.

Then her face relaxed:

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Dixon, walk in."

"Not into this house," said Ishmael Dixon, glaring at her, and as he gave her a letter his hands shook.

"Well, that's polite," said the cook, watching him cross the yard. "S'pose he's upset about his son's death, poor old chap. Don't wonder at it—the only one they had—and might have been saved if they'd had a doctor in time. Miss Esther says he didn't believe enough. How on earth are you to know when you *do* believe enough to make it safe not to have the doctor? Well, my bread's catching now—I'll take it out before I carry this note up to Mrs. Moor."

She carried it at her leisure into the living-room, where Mrs. Moor and Nellie sat at work.

"Ishmael Dixon brought it, 'm," she said, lingering by the door.

A shadow crossed Mrs. Moor's face.

"Oh, poor fellow, how was he?"

"Aged," said the maid, "very aged and ill-looking. He wouldn't come in."

"No?" said Mrs. Moor, opening her letter, which was written in a pointed hand on the kind of ornamental paper sold in boxes at Christmas-time. So the kitchen-maid reluctantly retired.

"It's from Mrs. Pobson," said Mrs. Moor, looking up at her daughter. "Seems she had just got it written when Aunt Burdock chanced to go in, and offered to send it for her, as Dixon had to pass here. She wants to see me, but can't come out because of a cold. I shall have to go."

"Does she say what she wants to see you about?" asked Nellie.

"No," said Mrs. Moor, "but I expect it's something about Esther."

"Well, she can't become great without having things said about her," responded Nellie, fixing her mind on the conversation with an effort. "If people left her alone it would be a sign she wasn't really anything particular, you know."

"Oh, of course," said Mrs. Moor, smiling at Nellie with a cheerful acceptance of the other side to greatness—but still that shadow would creep back again. "If only it

wasn't Stephen Astley and the Pobsons—and Aunt Burdock—the best people—those you value most."

Stephen Astley.

The very name seemed somehow to bring a feeling of stability and protection with it, and Nellie suddenly wished that she had not told him to keep away. She felt a craving for somebody real, who didn't have dreams or theories—or even ideas that he talked about—but just did his daily work to the best of his ability, and believed in God in the old solid way without trimmings.

Nellie did not think so definitely, but that was how she felt, after being with Stallard and Esther. It was like a longing for good wholesome food in the plain daylight after a course of luxurious supper parties. She had a sort of moral nausea for the abnormal.

"It isn't very likely," she said, after Mrs. Moor had reread the letter, "that Stephen Astley will come here again. He is so annoyed at Mary being a Hearer and having her rooms full of people from Lowport that the Astleys never would visit—clerks' wives and people like that—who think it fine to be intimate with Miss Astley of Astleys in High Street."

"That's narrow," said Mrs. Moor.

"Well, he is narrow," answered Nellie, "but," she paused, "I almost begin to admire narrowness—of his sort. It never kept him from being nice to the Pobsons, and Aunt Burdock at her broadest; he just suited them. And I know why"—those vague thoughts became more and more definite—"it was because he's real. Really real.

Not saying he is for the sake of seeming more so than other folks; not ever wanting to make any impression at all—I can't explain——"

"You mean," said Mrs. Moor, and a hint that she was getting just a little tired of Stallard appeared for the first time, "you mean that he doesn't give his old tobacco pouch to a beggar and then come home and talk about the brotherhood of man; he just gives a shilling and says nothing about it."

Nellie looked across at her mother with a startled, arrested gaze that said:

"You too? Have you too found that out?"

But Mrs. Moor's answering glance showed quite plainly that she had found out nothing; she only shared that unconscious craving for wholesome food which a Burdock had to come back to sooner or later.

"Well," she said, rising, "I suppose I had better go. Mrs. Pobson isn't the woman to send for me unless she thinks she has some good reason, especially as there has been a little feeling about Esther."

"Oh," cried Nellie, "we seem to stand on a little island by ourselves since this started."

"Well," said Mrs. Moor, throwing up her head, "if we do! The relations of the great movers of the world have always had to suffer. It's part of it, and I'm thankful and proud as the Mother of Jesus was, when the sword presses into my heart."

"Oh, hush, mother," said Nellie. "Esther's found out a wonderful cure, though she doesn't care for us to know the ins and outs of it, and says our presence stultifies her

powers—but still, it isn't a religion—I can't ever look on it as a religion."

Mrs. Moor's vivid face lit up.

"I can," she said. "Oh, Nellie, wait until you've had a child of your own and watched her grow up, always different, always with a promise of greatness—and then see the promise fulfilled when you were giving up hope—you'll know then how I believe."

Nellie shook her head.

"I should never *want* a child of mine to be great as much as you wanted it. Why, mother, you wanted it almost enough to push her into greatness. I used to feel so sorry we were none of us clever."

"Everything's made up for now," said Mrs. Moor, standing in the full light of the window and saying the words in a tone that made them seem a song of triumph.

Mrs. Pobson was in a most unusual state of inactivity when Mrs. Moor arrived, and was seated on the sofa before a large fire in the living-room.

"Don't kiss me," she said when her visitor advanced; or rather, "Don't kiss be," was her exact expression. "I've got the bost awful cold in by head."

Now Mrs. Moor had come full of dignity, and altogether in the high and distant frame of mind which befits the mother of a criticized celebrity in the presence of the critic. But to keep it up in this warm, homely parlour with Mrs. Pobson with a cold in her head was not possible. A thousand suggestions from the intimate past when they were girls together clamoured against it. She and Betsy shelling peas—she and Betsy talking of their lovers—she and Betsy

discussing the wedding gown—doing everything but treat each other as Mrs. Moor had determined to do when she set out.

She succumbed to the suggestions and sat down in a horsehair chair that looked uncomfortable, but was just built for tired, worried people.

"Well?" she said.

"Look here," said Mrs. Pobson, going purple all over to match her inflamed nose. "I've got this cold with getting out of my warm bed and trapsing up and down the bedroom at night with Pobson using language at me—which he seldom or never does—from between the bed-curtains. And he said to-day, when I was putting my bodice on: 'Look here, Betsy, you send for Agnes Moor this very morning, or there'll be murder done, for such a night as last I cannot and will not stand. There, you have it.'"

Those old thoughts, of Betsy and she together, prompted the next remark:

"You knew you'd only to send for me, or come."

But they both knew in their hearts that Mr. Moor was not to be lightly intruded on by the Pobsons; that had been learned and agreed upon without any words, as it only could have been between such good people, twenty years ago.

"Well," said Mrs. Pobson, "I wouldn't send until I was sure. I know, Agnes, what store you set by your children. So do I by my William. But not the same. I haven't been burnt up with wanting him to *do* something as you have. You were always ambitious—that

was one reason why you fell in love with Mr. Moor, when there were plenty of others that wanted you—you felt he was above the rest. The Burdock spirit in you's turned into something that drives—like a storm. But you couldn't get anything to drive. Now Esther's turned out to be somebody wonderful—and—and I expect you're pleased enough."

"Of course I am," said Mrs. Moor defiantly, implying, "What then?"

"Well," said Mrs. Pobson. That was a great word of hers, coming with a sort of heave of her comfortable person. "Well, it's in this way. Ned wants to come and lodge with us."

She stared at Mrs. Moor over that swollen nose, and Mrs. Moor stared at her.

"What on earth do you mean?" said Mrs. Moor at last.

"I mean," said Mrs. Pobson, "that Ned isn't satisfied at home. He says all this Hearers business drives him nearly crazy, and he can't stand it. He says the other young fellers at Lowport worry him about it until he doesn't know whether he is on his head or his heels, and he wants to cut the whole concern. That was how he put it," added Mrs. Pobson apologetically.

"But why," said Mrs. Moor gravely, "couldn't he come to me first about it? I feel very much hurt, Betsy, to think a son of mine should go to even an old friend like you, without consulting me."

"I told him that," answered Mrs. Pobson. "I told him that. But he wouldn't listen to reason. Says you're

so taken up with Esther's success that you won't put up a finger to interfere with her, and that he'll go to lodgings in Lowport if not here, where he'll take to drink and cigars as a matter of course. What was I to do? I'm sure we're not in want of a lodger, though William is settled now. But what on earth was I to do?"

Mrs. Moor rose from her chair, and that something in her face which made it more vivid than other people's—that shining in her brown eyes which was tears and laughter in one, became more marked than they had been in Mrs. Pobson's recollection.

"Why, Betsy," she said, "you'd take my son in, if he were in rags and starving. So of course you told him he might come."

"Only subject to your—and Mr. Moor's approval."

Mr. Moor always seemed an afterthought in connection with his children.

"I'm afraid it will have to be," said Mrs. Moor, "and I am glad he has come to you, not to any one else. I'd noticed he seemed discontented, but what can I do? Esther's work must go on."

Mrs. Pobson bounced up suddenly, scattering her handkerchief and peppermints.

"Need it?" she cried. "That's just it. Need it? I'm not one to talk much about religion, but Pobson and I stick to the old brand, and I should have thought you would do the same. I don't deny there are truths in the new creed of Esther's, but you can find every one of them in the Bible if you look. I call it mean—these fancy religions turning up, and taking all that's good in them

doesn't like the Message and doesn't believ
are we to do? Charlie gone—and now N
boys once go they never come back."

Mr. Moor rubbed his fingers carefull
tated.

"I'm getting a little tired of the Hearer
said. "I think Esther and Stallard had bett
as soon as possible. I should call it an im
interfere with my children's religious belief-
acted on that principle—left them with an
choose for themselves. And I married you w
young enough to be guided, or else the Bu
would have been too strong for me, and you'd
on your own creed as the only means c
Now, having brought them up to choose,
on Esther because she has chosen what s
incomprehensible. She says she hears
perhaps she does—anyway, she thinks sh
this is a Universe in which anything that
be."

And when Ned came in he was sent to his father's room.

"So, Ned," said Mr. Moor, "I gather you're going to leave us. You don't like the Hearers. Well—no more do I. But I neither send Esther away, which I might do, nor do I threaten to lodge with Mr. Pobson, though I'm sure I should be very comfortable there. For one reason, Esther is to be married soon, and for another I can't punish a child of mine for using the freedom I bestowed upon her myself. If you'd turned Buddhist, Ned, I should have said the same. Each person's strivings towards the Infinite are their own private affair—absolutely beyond the reach of any man. That's how I take it."

He spoke most kindly, but just as any man might to a pleasant young fellow whom he wished to advise without any sense of responsibility. Ned, red and uncomfortable, had never felt his father to be so far off as in this difficult moment.

"I can't live here with all this humbug going on," he blurted out.

"How do you know it is humbug?" asked Mr. Moor reasonably. "Your friend Stallard's an ardent believer, and you look on him as an epitome of all that's great and good."

"Oh, he's in love with Esther," said Ned. Then he went on: "I've heard from Charlie this week. He says he can quite understand this business. Esther used to make him feel as if Masterby Wood was full of people. Even now—he says—when he is walking in a lonely part of the forest, and dusk is coming on, he can almost

ngry at the still unfinished Toby
must be so. Well, Ned, to return
issue. Why did you go to the
sulting your mother or me? That
nor right, you know, when we hav
your life."

"I did it," said Ned straightfo
thought there would be a fuss, and I
But I didn't know, of course, that M
mother. I meant to speak of it my
got the matter fixed up with the Pol
you've got to know through them: not
for the best. I've nothing to complain
like what there is at home he ought
must turn out."

"Esther will be sorry to find she i
leaving home," suggested Mr. Moor,
your mother."

"I'm sorry about mother," said
clear out. Anyway, until after

to see Mary led by the nose and made such a fool of——"

"But I hear Mary Astley is cured—the show case," said Mr. Moor.

"A show case! That's the hateful part. But I must own she is cured," said Ned grudgingly. Then he looked his father straight in the face, determined not to be abashed. "She would have got well just as soon if she'd believed in me," he continued, "only she was shut up in a bedroom where you couldn't get at her most of the time. If she'd married Charlie and had to do with one servant and work hard——"

"You forget, my son," said Mr. Moor, smiling, "that she has a sufficient income. She could have provided her own luxuries."

"I don't forget," cried Ned. "That's why Charlie never asked her to marry him, though there were times when he went to Astley's and saw her alone and had the chance. He wouldn't ask her and be looked on as a fortune-hunter."

"Ah, he loved his pride just a little the most——I see," said Mr. Moor.

"Whatever do you mean?" said honest Ned.

But Mr. Moor could resist the Toby jug no longer.

"Well, then," he said, taking up a cement brush, "we must look upon this affair as settled, I suppose. Glad to welcome you back, Ned, when the Hearers have moved their shrine."

Ned went to the door, paused, and turned round again.

"Father, were you really ever very serious about anything but mending china?" he said.

Mr. Moor looked up from the jug in a way that caused Ned to feel as he did when a boy, after he had tried to "cheek" his father.

"If I had found anything worth being serious about, in the world, do you think I should be here?" he said.

CHAPTER XIV

ESTHER walked across the fields which led to the corner of Masterby Wood, near Jane Burdock's farm. She thought, as she walked, of the days when she and Charlie used to run across there, and hide under the trees, pretending they saw the queer Wood People with brown, twisted faces and outstretched arms. She *had* seen them, in a way—so had Charlie—and she wished he were not so far away, because he would understand about the Voices as no one else could. He knew how easily unreal things took on reality.

The air was pleasant, and the freedom and freshness were very welcome after many days of work and emotional exaltation. She was beginning to see that the crown and chain in this world always go together, but she did not yet find it irksome, because she was intoxicated with her wonderful success. Even if she did not believe in herself she would have been unconsciously drunk with the notoriety of it all; but now that she had a perfect belief in her own mission she was *consciously* exalted, thinking herself full of the spirit of holiness, and glorying in the fact of not knowing what Message she would deliver next. Her nonsense—vague echoes of what she had heard mixed with unbalanced thoughts of her own—sounded to her as

the brown shadows, and she e
feeling of awe and exaltation
when she crept through the h
The same thrilling sense of
could see or hear, came to hei
wood.

The trees were in the fulln
as she looked up the long ride
road lay that led past Jane Burc
with her eyes fixed on the tin
while it began to look rather lik
in the sunlight just beyond th
stopped short as a thought sudd

The Holy Grail.

Why, this was how knights c
and then made it real with their c
after holiness.

They'd passed as she did tl
following that hope of God whic
to the experience of livin

some wild creature that paused, startled, before running into cover.

She could make out nothing for a while but the coo of the stock doves, the crackle of a falling branch, the humming undertone of a wood in early summer; then she heard that far sound which heralded the Voices, and murmured under her breath:

"Joy! Joy is the meaning of life.
Without joy there is no life.
Life is joy, therefore it cannot hold pain."

Then she cried out, very loud:

"There is no pain!"

Ah—how that wonderful phrase echoed down the wood aisle—fulfilment, if it were true, of all the cravings of all the generations, and Esther walked on under the silent trees with the most glorious uplifted sense of happiness, sure that this was her inspired message to the world.

When she came to the other side of the wood, there was an old woman gathering sticks, to whom she said, "Good day."

But the woman bent over the faggots without raising her head, and Esther felt a little insulted, as if a king had deigned to address a subject who remained indifferent. Coming after that marvellous moment of exaltation it struck cold to her pride.

"Good day," she said again, more loudly. "It's a lovely day."

The woman paused and looked round.

"Maybe for them that can do nothing. I'm done up

you are going to have when you get l
mind on the goodness of the Father who

Then she went on again, not realizing t
before that old woman the germ that m
creed alive—the principle of faith and c
the Message of Christ, and is vital enough
thousand creeds: which she herself had
consciously as her mother's milk.

Just beyond the wood was the rough roa
where Stallard had appointed to meet l
returned from Masterby. He had been tl
reporting; for the staff of the "Lowport
include many competent reporters, and th
to take his turn now and then; but he
be seen when Esther emerged. After a li
ever, she saw him coming from the directio

"I am very sorry to have kept you wa
with the punctilious politeness he alway
his betrothed. "I've left my bicycle at t
road here is longer than I expected."

heat such as she had never known before; but she could find no way of letting him know all this, so, after a moment's pause, she turned and moved sedately beside him.

"You're not very demonstrative by nature, are you, Paul?" she said after a silence.

"No," he said, looking straight before him. "I'm a very undemonstrative man, but those often feel the most, Esther. You—you must remember that, dear, when we are married, and forgive me if I seem cold."

Esther turned to him with a face so lighted that it must have seemed beautiful to any one who loved her.

"Oh, I shall understand," she answered. "I shall not expect you to be like ordinary men when you're so far above them. Why, what they strive for most you wouldn't even hold out your hand to get. You would be more likely to refuse. That's what I first liked in you, your utter disinterestedness. I remember listening that night when you told how you felt yourself a common man, the brother of common men all the world over; a citizen of no particular city, but just a poor pilgrim of the world. You, who with your gifts might by now have been anything—have done anything—and yet you're content to be a pilgrim. Oh, Paul, it's wonderful."

"If I have raised the common life by the least fraction I have fulfilled the purpose of my being," quoted Stallard from one of his own speeches, but rather impatiently, and swishing the long grass with his stick.

"When I passed through the wood just now," continued Esther, with that shining look still turned upon him,

do so in company. I see how that is; you're
want just to talk about ourselves. But
thinking that somehow you politicians fol
through the dark wood too. Through n
exaggerations, and selfish aims, you're press
Holy Grail of every Englishman—the perf
wealth. That's the ideal you point to, an
follow, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Stallard mechanically, "to e
equal chance—our ideal's that, you know."

Esther remembered passionately how sh
and waited for her chance, and this appeale
a force it would have for few women.

"That's a thing to live for," she cried
almost wonder if I have a right to take this l
you down to my work, and my aims, when y
going your own way and helping on the work
demanding a great sacrifice of you, Paul, an
have perhaps no right to demand. So far
sonally, are concerned—leaving me and my

Stallard put his arm round her.

"My dear," he said gravely, "I do not deny that I am making a great sacrifice, and it brings me to a point which I have long hesitated to speak about, for fear of giving you a wrong impression. But I think we should make some arrangement by which I may have the means to come and go as I please if I give up my work."

"My money affairs will be entirely under your control," replied Esther. "You manage them now, you know, and you'll go on managing them, so you must take what you think right. I shall leave the whole thing with you. I'm not good at figures, or I should have done better in that London office."

This time Stallard kissed her on the lips.

"There's no one like you in the world, dearest," he whispered.

But Esther had still the uneasy sense that she was asking too much of him, pulling him down, somehow, from a height to which he had climbed before he met her. She—the Messenger—was doing wonderful things for everybody but the man she loved—that was the only bitterness in her perfect moment, as she stood on the edge of the wood with the scent of the late hawthorn coming across the evening fields. It was the one moment—everybody knows it—which goes on shining until life ends. Others fade into the kindly dusk; blue and golden, crimson and emerald, like little lamps they flicker out. But this heart's morning star remains as a promise of Day Eternal.

Stallard walked close to Esther now, with his arm in

They stood together looking at it, and E
enough to make up for years of sorrow
Nellie with all her sweetness and tender
be, because Nellie had always known she c
when she wanted it. To Esther it was li
a long winter, like joy after sorrow, like an
longed for and come at last.

"We'd better be getting on," said Stella
be dark before we see over the house."

"We'll only furnish a few rooms at first,'
"Just what we can afford to pay for."

"Oh, there'll be plenty——" began Sta
perhaps you're right, you may want to go to a
It is your duty to keep up a certain state
own sake, but for that of your followers.
simple, but in keeping with your high callir
that to—to your Message."

He looked inquiringly at Esther as he conclu
if he expected her to say something which sh

"Yes," she replied

"The old ballroom will make a capital hall for your classes."

"Will it?" said Esther. "I have never seen it yet, you know, though I have often passed the house—old Mr. Browne never let any one in while he lived."

"He was one of the Brownes of Masterby, wasn't he?"

"The last one," said Esther, "and——Well—doesn't the house look like it?"

They walked up the drive, where, in a year, the weeds and moss had gathered; and the birds flew chattering and affrighted from the trees as they do in deserted gardens where nobody comes. The house that was thronged with company in the days of old Yorkshire, when London was a dangerous journey off, now lay blank and silent in the evening light—the very epitome of things that have had their day.

"Seems odd we should be taking it," continued Esther, as a shadow of this thought fell across her mind. "We're the last people those old Brownes would have allowed to cross their threshold if they were alive. A newspaper man and a leader of a new religion—they'd have imprisoned you and burned me in the good old days, Paul."

"Oh, it's our turn now," Stallard answered as he fitted the key into the lock. "The caretaker has left everything open; he'll be back directly. Now—come in."

He took her arm and they went together over the doorstep into the hall, which was darkly panelled and square and simple—not artistic in any way, but suited to the Burdocks as if it had been built for them, as indeed it was for men of the same race and type. Esther looked

round and at once felt at home there. Stallard's idea had been correct—the place exactly suited.

A heavy door led to an oak staircase which had never been carpeted, and a square window let in the quiet light through the elms outside. A long room ran down one side of the corridor, panelled in green and with small round windows high up on the walls. The dim light and length of the room reminded Esther of the granary where her mission started, and here, too, she felt at home. The place had been thought out and made by a race so like the Burdocks in all essentials that it just came to her like a heritage.

"Oh, Paul," she said, "we must live here all our lives. Why—it's our place; made for us! I feel as if I'd been born here. I love it already."

She would have loved any house in which she was going to live with Stallard, but when the exact satisfaction of her taste was added to that, she began really to have the most curious affection for The Grey House. They walked down the corridor with that quiet light still on them and entered a large, pleasant bedroom looking south over the garden.

"I thought this would do for you," said Stallard, throwing back the shutter. "There's a room through there that I could have. What do you think?"

He stood in the middle of the room, staring round already with an air of proprietorship, and did not notice Esther's face as she crossed to the open window.

"Yes," she said, controlling her voice. "I think it will do very well."

But she saw, looking out across the elms, a picture of home such as every woman sees in the house her lover brings her to, if she loves him; whether it's a little red-brick box in a side street or a stately mansion, the picture is really just the same always, because love and hope dwarf everything else into the background that does not matter.

"I wish," Esther said, turning round at last, "that you liked all this as much as I do; and yet, if you did, it would not be you, Paul. I'm proud to think that you are free from all the bonds that hold other people. I'm proud, after all, to know that I can give you nothing—that you're everything the Universe can give you in yourself. I know all this is a burden you are taking up because of me—you're renouncing what you value most, for me—you'd rather, yourself, have a tent in the wilderness—be free to move upon your pilgrimage. Ah, don't think because I'm so pleased with this place that I shall ever forget what you are giving up to come and live in it."

The sunset light behind Esther outlined her slim figure in a golden haze, her eyes shone, and her voice, though she spoke quietly, was like the voice a flame would have; for the purpose behind it this time was the strongest she had ever known; she wanted Stallard to feel how she loved him.

"Of course," he answered, "I am giving up a good deal. I can't expect to have as much influence, living in this way, as I otherwise should have. In fact I may find it necessary to give up my political career altogether. But, Esther, I feel yours is the higher mission. If I help you

to carry the Message I shall have done my part in the world, though it is only a small and nameless one, not the great career I hoped for."

"I'll try to make it up to you as far as I can," said Esther simply, only the baldest words being at her command.

It was dusk by the time they went away from the house, and they turned at the gate to look back on it once more. It was inexpressibly peaceful and simple and withdrawn, a place for a Message to go out from, that should be for the comfort and healing of the unquiet world.

"The Voices will often speak to me in that garden," said Esther in a low voice. "If I did not hear the Voices, and know I had fallen by chance—or it seemed like chance—on the greatest revelation of the unseen Creator since time began, I would give up my career for yours, Paul. I always wanted to do something—you don't know how I longed—but I'd give that up for you, and glory in doing it, if I did not feel I had a message from the Unseen. At first I seemed to myself a liar and a charlatan, but I see now I was being led to the truth by a crooked way. The truth must have been glimmering behind my make-believe like dawn beyond the dark sky. My rush of desperate determination to make myself felt in the world somehow, if I died for it, must have been the dawn-wind, breaking——!"

She stopped short, and there came a very distant sound of Jane Burdock's pigeons, cooing on their way to roost.

Stallard for once found a difficulty in producing a suitable

reply. His expression was puzzled and impatient as he groped, and Esther waited.

"It's—it's always darkest before dawn," he said, snatching at something—anything—to break that queer silence. Then he recovered himself. "Never dream of giving up your work," he said urgently; "that would be a terrible thing. I am satisfied to stand at the right hand of one who serves the world; to go down to posterity as your helper."

Esther listened with grave satisfaction to his inflated speech. She was already growing so used to flattery that she saw nothing exaggerated in it, only a very dear and right appreciation of herself.

They said very little more as they walked down the road, and Stallard once began to whistle a comic song and checked himself, then yawned and suppressed that, and looked, as they passed Jane Burdock's yard, less like an illumined helper than a very bored young man.

The pigeons were all quiet now, and a light or two shone from the farmhouse; Miss Burdock's great voice could be heard booming across the stillness, and Ishmael Dixon's rough growl answered. They were both in the wooden shed with the pigeon-cote, at the corner of the yard nearest the wood.

"Get off home with you, Ishmael," shouted Miss Burdock. "Your wife'll wonder what's gotten you."

"I'll go when I've done here," said Dixon.

"Well, what are you doing?" said Miss Burdock. "Surely there's no need to sit up of a night to mend the

father put such a place up."

"I'm putting a fresh lock on it," said
steals my straw."

"Rubbish!" said Miss Burdock. "A
pay for that grand new lock?"

"I can," said Ishmael. "I'm not
haven't money for that, and I won't h
stealed."

"Oh, you're a——"

But what Ishmael Dixon was in hi
Esther and Stallard never knew, becaus
out of earshot.

"Shall we go through the wood?" sai

"It's getting very dark," said Stallard
better keep to the road."

Esther would have liked the walk in th
all the mysterious night-sounds hummin
she turned obediently into the high ro
soon passed them.

"That's Lavington," said Stallard

"Why should he?" said Stallard. "You're not such pals as all that, are you?"

"We're very great friends," said Esther. "I like him immensely."

"Well, I don't," said Stallard. "And I hope, Esther, you won't have too much to do with him. I don't trust him."

"Oh, you may," said Esther eagerly. "I—Well, Paul, I don't mind telling you, now, that I borrowed money of him to hold the first meeting in Lowport. He was the only person in the world I could turn to—and I think that shows——"

"Have you paid it back?" interrupted Stallard.

"No," said Esther, "but I shall do so to-morrow. I always meant to take it to him as soon as he returned. I wanted to thank him properly, so I wouldn't send it."

"Esther, you must let me take it. I'm the proper person."

"No," said Esther, flashing round at him. "Can't you see that would be an insult?"

"Insult or not, it is the right thing," persisted Stallard.

"Then I'll do the wrong thing," said Esther, "for I will never treat him like that after all his goodness to me."

"You think," said Stallard, "that you can call the tune because you pay the piper. Is that very generous?"

"Oh, Paul," gasped Esther, standing still like a person who has received an unexpected blow. "Oh, you know it isn't that." Then she thought of a solution. "Why, Paul, you foolish boy—you're jealous."

"No, I'm not," said Stallard stubbornly, "but I hate your going to see him, and I want you to drop him."

They were quite close to the spot where Esther had known that moment of hers—but it already twinkled in a distant sky—it was already a star, as Esther replied:

"Well, I'll just go this once and then drop him. I couldn't bear for you to think I took my own way because I was paying the house rent, especially after all you have given up for me, dear."

She sighed, she felt she would have to be so terribly careful to prevent his longing for freedom and a tent in the wilderness. It seemed a big thing to tie a pilgrim of the world to her apron-strings, for though she was growing inordinately vain in relation to the world, she remained humble towards her lover, because those who love truly must always bend the knee—there is no other way.

The sound of Lavington's trap had quite died away, even in that stillness, before Stallard spoke again. Then he took Esther's arm and leaned towards her.

"Dear little girl, don't go to Lavington. Let me take the money," he whispered.

Esther shook her head.

"I can't, Paul," she said. "I wish I could, but I can't be so mean. I'll never have anything more to do with him. Isn't that enough?"

But it evidently was not enough, for Stallard removed his arm and walked on the opposite side of the road to punish her, switching the buttercups.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, when they reached

the garden gate. That perfect moment twinkled very distantly now through a little mist of tears.

"No," he said, then he caught sight of Nellie framed in light near the uncurtained window. "Well, just for a minute," he added.

So Esther felt joyfully that she was almost forgiven, and the moment shone out again in a clear sky.

CHAPTER XV

THE something in Esther which adulation had not spoiled made her refuse the carriage now kept for her at the inn, and walk into Shelton to see Lavington next morning. She was not yet rich, but the heavy fees paid by those who came to her classes, and the sale of her book, provided already a certain income which was augmented at irregular periods by the money paid for treatment in illness. But that now took a less prominent place in her work than it had done at first—the *theory* was now of the chief importance, and she intended eventually to leave to others the actual carrying out. The whole system seemed to evolve naturally—one idea following another without conscious invention—and Esther thought it was a direct inspiration. But any idea will grow like that, given space and opportunity — ideas are usually killed in the seed, sometimes in the shoot, but scarcely ever are they guarded to maturity, in which case they make trees indeed.

Esther had not walked into Shelton for a long time, and the long, straight road with the sea booming on one side of it brought back memories she had thought forgotten. That cold morning when she fought her way in, to write Lavington's letters, and saw the book which contained the

little seed of an idea which was growing now so fast. The evening when she walked home with Astley in a storm of resentment because he plainly regarded her as a person who didn't matter—just something belonging to Nellie. She could see still how weird the little hill had looked against the sky, and could feel, almost, the bitter sense of failure that rushed over her then, as she passed it.

She stood a moment in the June sunshine to realize the difference, and she lifted her heart in a very real thankfulness to that God whom she believed in, now that He had given her what she wanted.

The easy agnosticism which she had learned from her father was impossible to her now, and she believed a myth as fanatically as those must who have wanted all their lives to believe, and found nothing, and grasped something at last.

The goodness of God was very real to her as she walked along that road, permeated her, lifted her into that state of exaltation in which her ideas grew and expanded. The almost dizzy sense of her own greatness, which always preceded the delusion of the Voices, came upon her. The smell of the sea, the glint of the distant waves, the green of the grass, and the blue of the summer sky became more vivid and intense to her than they ever could be to a normal person. They seemed to be a part of her and she a part of them. She had a most glorious realization of belonging to the universe, and being in communion with the eternal spirit of life. The life in every blade of grass that shook in the wind seemed to find its echo in her, the song of every bird, the joyous hum of every little insect. In her

seemed concentrated creation's hymn of praise as she listened to the Voices saying:

"God is good—God is good.

He gives to us of His goodness.

Therefore we are good, and with goodness there can be no sin.

Therefore there is no sin."

How it flashed across the green world for her, startled, blinded her. That new glorious Message which the Voices brought:

There is no sin!

She walked on again as though surrounded by a luminous cloud through which everything she saw—even the dull little drab houses of Shelton at the road's end—looked wonderful; and the strongest sense of her own holiness filled her being. She felt close to the Source of all holiness, one with it, and the thought that she could ever sin seemed an outrage. The old Methodist spirit of the Burdocks, which had caused one of them to state that from his conversion to his death he had never committed a known sin, flamed out in Esther, kindled by egotism and fed by delusion. And she swept on as if in a chariot of fire, not noticing the road or the people who stared at her, to Lavington's door.

The moment she was shown into the room he noticed her strange dilated eyes and wild look of exaltation.

"Sit down," he said quietly, after greeting her with a plain friendliness that jarred her swollen vanity. Then he began to talk of Egypt and his own improvement in health.

"Oh, your illness was in your mind, you know," said Esther, "and your mind has been so engaged that you have thrown it off. That's why the doctors recommend travelling. But you could have been cured by my treatment just as well if you had stayed at home."

She wanted to force him at once to a recognition of her greatness; for only to Stallard was she the old Esther—to every one else she would be the inspired Messenger or nothing.

Lavington looked at her for a moment in silence. Her face was calmer now, and her eyes, though over bright, were quite steady. He was puzzled. Then he impulsively held out his hand.

"Esther," he said, "I understand. I know how you wanted a chance, poor little fretted, ambitious spirit; how you caught at every forlorn hope of one: and I came nearer to loving you in your fiery discontent than I have done to caring for any woman since I was a lad at college. But it was your honesty I liked as well. The downright simplicity of your egotism. You haven't lost that?"

"Egotism!" said Esther, drawing a long breath like a person just awake and pushing back her heavy black hair, "Why, I'm living for the world."

Lavington frowned and the corners of his sarcastic mouth lifted.

"You've got that charming phrase from Stallard, no doubt," he said, "but please don't bring it here." He paused, then went on impatiently. "Why the dickens can't you own to me, who know where your idea came from, that you're playing for your own hand, that you

wanted a chance and took the only one you could get hold of, with your eyes open to its enormity. That would be you. I should recognize your spirit in that, but I don't recognize it when you come pretending that you're working for the sake of your fellow-creatures. Why, it was splendid that you'd the spirit to fight them, trample on them, force them to give you what you wanted by evil means since you could gain nothing by good—but it was a fair fight you made. One little dark woman against a world who wanted nothing of her. I heard of you in Cairo, and I clapped my hands. I came home to say 'Bravo' to an adventuress of the soul. But not like this."

Esther stood up, offended and yet moved in spite of it.

"You don't understand," she said. "I may have come by clouded ways upon the light, but it's the real light I have found at last. I see now that my fancies as a child, when I imagined footsteps passing, were the foretelling of my Message. Those footsteps—passing my window—they were the echo coming before of the endless company of Hearers. And the words I read in your book were just the pointing finger. If that had not chanced to meet my eye there would have been some other indication given to me. I was set apart—appointed—the Voices were waiting for me—it had to come."

Lavington looked at her under his eyelids searchingly, he began to understand.

"You didn't hear the Voices until you had dwelt upon them for a long time, did you?" he asked. "When did you first believe in them? Was it gradual or a sudden inspiration?"

"It was at a moment of great strain," said Esther. "I was holding a meeting, and the words I wanted wouldn't come. Only plain, bald words that didn't seem enough. Then—I think perhaps I've got Aunt Burdock's power of managing an audience—I suddenly saw it would be an effective thing to order absolute silence and tell the people to listen. I was at my wits' end what to do. So they were quite quiet. You could hear a woman's sigh at the back of the room, amongst all those people. Then, while I was waiting in agony, wondering what would happen next, the Voices really spoke to me. I was frightened, and ran out of the hall. I can't describe to you the overwhelming shock. What I'd pretended—made real——"

She sat down, covering her eyes with her hands and trembling. It was the first time she had told any one all the truth of it, and the vivid recollection called up by her words, mingled with the exaltation of the hour just past, produced an indescribable tumult of feeling.

Lavington's face grew kinder than any one in Shelton had ever seen it, and he put his hand on her thin shoulder.

"My dear," he said, "neither your mind nor body can stand this sort of thing for long. Can't you realize that your imagination is out of gear? You put such a strain on it that its elasticity departed. It wouldn't fly back when you'd done imagining—can't you see, Esther? That's all it is. You tried so to impress your imagination on other people that you fixed it on yourself. The Voices are a delusion."

In a moment Esther's mood altered, and she started up, head back and eyes flashing.

"Could I have founded a sect on the strength of a delusion?"

"Of course," said Lavington quietly. "Why, it's the easiest thing in the world to make people believe what they want to believe. Poor, pitiable, suffering humanity is always waiting—you've only to know its weakness and promise——"

"That doesn't last. How do you account for the Message *lasting* as it's going to do?"

"Because," said Lavington most unexpectedly, "you are a Burdock. You've imbibed and inherited Christianity from a sturdy race of men and women who believed in their Bible as simply as they believed in morning coming when they went to bed at night. That's in you. That shows through the nonsense and claptrap of your Message, and you get the credit for it. I'm not religious myself, as you know, but I respect the tremendous hold of Christianity on the human heart."

"You seem to think," said Esther, with a good deal of real dignity, "that it is an easy thing to give a new gospel to the world. I will not argue the matter with you. We have formed a rule to exclude argument. There is only a spiritual way of dealing with matters of the spirit."

Lavington shrugged his shoulders, unwilling to contend any more with this new, stilted fluency, which was so unlike the girl he remembered that he began to lose interest in her. Then he saw the rare flush darken her cheek under those strange eyes as a sudden thought struck her, and she became once more the little woman against the world whom he had almost loved.

"Oh, Mr. Lavington," she exclaimed, "how could I forget what I came for? And I've seemed so ungrateful—when you were the only friend in the world I could turn to." She laid an envelope on the table. "I can't thank you. If you hadn't lent me that money I could not have held the first meeting in Lowport."

"Then we part friends, after all?" smiled Lavington. "You forgive me for what I have said?"

"Yes," said Esther, a little pompously, it must be owned. "I freely forgive you."

Lavington stared very thoughtfully at the table.

"Will you allow me to ask one thing more?" he said. "When are you going to be married?"

He lifted his eyes at the second question, and his look quickened into a surprised dismay at the illumination of Esther's face as she replied:

"Our wedding is to be next month."

"So soon?" he said quickly. Then he paused again to realize the joy and ardour that made her commonplace phrase a sort of bridal song. "Why," he thought to himself, "she's horribly in love with that wind-bag. A little flaming soul that can love like the women of old. What a tragedy." Aloud he continued awkwardly: "That's—that's very soon, isn't it? I think Stallard's a lucky man."

"Ah, it's I who am a lucky woman," smiled Esther. "He is giving up so much for me. For himself, you know, he'd rather just move about the world and have nothing to cumber him in his work. He always belonged to the Brotherhood of Common Men who have to work every day for the next day's dinner. Now he's giving that up

to live with me at The Grey House and manage my affairs. It's a great sacrifice, because he hates a fettered life like that."

"Only," said Lavington dryly, "I suppose he loves you more than he hates a life of luxury."

"Yes," said Esther, and the word just seemed a vibrating chord of happiness in the quiet room—the close of that bridal song.

Lavington looked down at the little dark, glorified face through the storm of pity that sometimes overtakes men who are seldom pitiful; when it does it always drives them into action; and he felt he must do something to stave off the inevitable. She must be given time to find out gradually that Stallard was not quite all she thought him, or the awakening would be too terrible.

"Look here," he said, "I'm going to do something you'll hate me for, but I like you enough to do it all the same. I'm going to beg you to put off your marriage."

Esther stared at him in offended amazement.

"What do you mean? You can, of course, have no influence with me in that matter; it lies between Paul and myself."

"Well, I want to come in too," said Lavington, flushing and speaking with difficulty. This was a most unpleasant job. "The fact is, you don't know him. No woman does know her lover, of course, but you're more blind than the rest. You must see him a little as he really is before you marry him, or you'll be terribly unhappy. With your nature it will come much worse when you're bound to him than when you are free. You must find out a little."

Esther turned very pale and walked towards the door.

"I see now why he didn't want me to come here, and I wish I had obeyed him," she said. "He knew, no doubt, that you'd a grudge against him."

"Esther," urged Lavington, following her, "I scarcely know him. Once or twice we have met and not amalgamated because—well, because I don't believe in him, if you like."

"I'm glad!" exclaimed Esther. "You don't believe in either of us, then; that's as it should be. I thought it was going to be very hard not to see you again, but it's going to be very easy."

She was breathless with indignation for her lover, and laid a hand on her panting chest in the effort to maintain self-control.

"Don't force me to do something you'll never forgive," said Lavington, more moved than she had ever seen him. "But I must induce you to put off this marriage for a few months. I know you—as I think nobody else knows you; I can't let you go into certain misery without using the power chance has put into my hands; but I can't tell you how odious it is to me even to think of using it. Still, if I must—if there's no other way——"

Esther came back a step or two and looked him straight in the face.

"No power on earth," she said, "shall make me put off my marriage."

"Unless," said Lavington slowly, holding her defiant eyes with his, "unless you put off your marriage for six months, I shall explain to the world through the news-

papers the origin of your creed. How you thought of it—how it grew—how the delusion of the Voices—for it is a delusion—first came to you."

"You couldn't be so dishonourable," said Esther in a low voice. "You couldn't!"

"I could and shall," answered Lavington, "and I think you know me well enough to believe me. The very fact of hating to keep my word so much will make me more scrupulous to do it."

"Don't talk of scruples—in connection with such a breach of confidence as that," flung out Esther.

"Well, I won't," said Lavington, holding out his hand. "I'll just leave you to choose."

He was miserably conscious how badly he had done it as she pushed past his extended hand.

"I'll ask Paul," she said. "He shall give you your answer."

And at the end of the street, still all afire with indignation and ready to fight the world for her lover, she encountered him.

"Had you forgotten I promised to meet you?" he asked, in answer to her disturbed greeting. "I suppose Lavington's been saying unpleasant things about me. I knew he would—that was why I didn't want you to go."

"Wait," said Esther, "until we get on the high road. I can't tell you here."

As soon as they gained the long, quiet road by the sea that led to Dunholme, Stallard said, rather uneasily, but with attempted nonchalance:

"Well, what is it?"

Esther stood still involuntarily.

"Lavington wants to put off our marriage."

"Lavington!" cried Stallard. "What on earth has he to do with it? You never——" he paused, glanced at her. No, it was not that. Lavington was not the man nor she the woman for an illicit affair. But could there be some story of his own past come to light? "You'd never believe what he said of me, and that is all I mind about," Stallard concluded. "I never pretended you were my first love, dearest; that crude offering was given long before I met you."

"So long as I'm the last," smiled Esther, with a glowing assurance that touched Stallard for a moment, and he made up his mind then to be true to her when they were married. He wouldn't be that foul cur, a man who lived on his wife and philandered with other women.

"You *shall* be the last," he said, and while he spoke he meant it.

They walked on again, the sea-wind and sun on their faces, and Stallard dropped down to his old level with the recollection of Lavington's interference.

"Well, what has that chap to say?" he demanded.

Esther paused before answering to search for words. The thing was so difficult to talk about because of the bewildered knowledge she had of the time when the Voices were a make-believe. She knew it, but could not realize it, for the Voices were now as much a part of the universe to her as the waves to her right hand.

"It's like this," she said slowly at last. "Mr. Lavington chanced to be there when I received the first vague intimation of the revelation which was to follow. It came naturally, as all great things do. I was looking at a book which spoke of Voices in the air which we cannot hear—which the human ear is not attuned to—and he said, 'There's a great opportunity for a new religion!' One of those quack religions, I think he said; he meant it was a chance for a charlatan, an impostor——" She broke off, looking at him with a sort of wonderment. "Oh, it's so difficult to explain; one can't explain a revelation."

Stallard glanced sideways at her with the odd expression he wore when she spoke of her inspiration.

"No," he said gravely. "No, of course that's inexplicable."

"What makes it all the more difficult is, that I *did* get my first gleam of light from that remark of his—I *did* see the chance—I *did* start on the road to holiness by a side-path. But I see now it was all a natural sequence of events leading me up to a wonderful truth."

"Of course," murmured Stallard, as she waited for a response.

"Still, though you understand, other people might not do so at first," continued Esther.

"Certainly not," replied Stallard with startled decision. "You must never think of telling them. It would ruin your influence altogether."

Esther turned to him.

"Ah, but that doesn't lie with me any longer," she said. "That's just the point—Mr. Lavington is going to relate

the whole circumstances in the newspapers unless we put off our marriage for six months, and of course I shall let him do it. I won't be dictated to by any one." She paused, glanced round at the windy sunny day, and felt the intoxication of power in every nerve. Stallard's deference ministered to this swollen egotism of hers, and she felt afresh the insulted astonishment at Lavington's conduct, which she experienced now, when she was treated like an ordinary being by any one but her lover.

"Lavington doesn't mean it. He's only bluffing because he wants to put a spoke in my wheel," said Stallard, after a pause which made Esther wonder.

"No," she said. "I know him. He's a queer mixture. He is quite certain to do it."

"No decent man could be such a cur," said Stallard hotly. "It's outrageous—a dishonourable breach of confidence. I'll see him; I'll go back now."

"Do," replied Esther. "I told him you should take the answer. Go back now, and say that no consideration in the world would make me postpone our marriage for a single day."

Without answering Stallard swung round and walked back at a tremendous pace to Lavington's house.

"Good day," said that gentleman politely when Stallard was shown in. "I suppose you are kind enough to bring me a message from Miss Moor." But it was significant that neither host nor guest held out a hand.

"Yes," said Stallard.

"Won't you sit down?" said Lavington, still more politely.

"No, what I have to say I prefer to say standing," replied Stallard, whose rage had mounted during that walk to a height that overpowered his usual discretion. "I think, sir, you're taking a mean and cowardly advantage of the woman who is to be my wife."

Lavington turned white to the lips, but his urbane attitude did not alter.

"So do I," he said calmly. "But one of us had got to do it, Mr. Stallard, and I thought I'd better be the one."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean," said Lavington, rising and facing him, "that you don't care for her. You don't believe in either her or her theories, while pretending to worship both. You're in love with her sister, and what will that mean when——"

"Mr. Lavington," said Stallard in a low voice, "if you don't stop I shall knock you down. I can't hold myself in any longer."

"Knock me down, then," said Lavington. "You very easily can, and you'll be doing a natural and justifiable thing."

Stallard sat down heavily.

"Oh, of course we can't fight like a couple of schoolboys," he said; "but I want to know what you're going to gain by all this. Esther will marry me in the end, you know—would if she had to walk through fire to do it. You can't prevent that."

"No," answered Lavington, "I don't suppose I can. I daresay I've acted like a fool in trying to do it. For once I have let feeling get the better of judgment, and

I'm afraid I have only driven you nearer, instead of parting you from her. She'll marry you now, even if she finds you out. But I shall stick to my word."

"Then we'll marry in spite of it and let you do what you like," said Stallard, rising to go.

"Yes," said Lavington. "That's the right attitude, of course. It is for Miss Moor to consider the effect of my communication upon her career and the resulting income, not for you. If she is ready to risk that——"

"Come, Lavington," said Stallard, dropping into a more conciliatory attitude as his temper cooled, "you can't mean it. You're not that sort. I've always taken you for one of the straightest and most upright men of my acquaintance."

"Then I'm sorry to forfeit your good opinion," said Lavington, "but I do mean it. Perhaps you may also have taken me for a man of my word? Well, I shall not have to disappoint you there. I shall write that article, for one London and one local paper, if you do not put off your wedding for six months; and I shall have a certain weight; without vanity I may mention that, I think."

There was no mistaking that he did mean it, and Stallard wished heartily that the days were back again when you could close a man's mouth by force without endangering your own liberty. Short of that there was nothing to be done but either to assent, or refuse and take the consequences.

"You're doing a most unfair and ungentlemanly thing," said Stallard at last.

"I know that," said Lavington, very pale and shaken

now it was evidently all over. "Well, what's your ultimatum?"

"Oh, we must put off the wedding, of course. I can't risk injuring Miss Moor's marvellous influence for good for my own pleasure—or even hers. We have a nobler conception of our life together than that, I assure you."

Then, with an air of manly dignity that was really very charming, he took his leave.

Lavington stood a moment at the street door looking after the fine figure.

"I don't wonder at her," he said to himself. "I really don't wonder at her. What a splendid adventurer the world has missed by his being born three hundred years too late."

CHAPTER XVI

ESTHER received a discreetly worded invitation to grace the Sea-Wall Opening at Shelton with her presence. The letter gracefully recognized that she stood above social functions, and made the request in the name of that Spirit of Progress with which her theories had become amalgamated. She and the Mayor would shake hands, so to speak, over the fine conclusion that nothing was too progressive for Lowport and neighbourhood, or too good to think of the inhabitants. They'd stand together, while the brass band played, in a perfect flare of comprehension that the people of Lowport, Shelton, and neighbourhood might be perfect, if they were at all inclined.

That was how the Mayor saw it when he added his entreaties to those of the Shelton committee.

But Esther received those letters the morning after her interview with Lavington, when the recollection of Stallard's return with the information that he had consented to postpone their marriage made other things not seem to matter. She believed that Stallard had acted most unselfishly and nobly, giving up his wishes and subduing his pride for the sake of her career; but in spite of that her woman's nature burned with indignant fury to think

that any man should dictate to her lover when she was to marry.

However, Stallard convinced her that this postponement was inevitable unless she wished to close her career, and that was not to be thought of; he took the Hearers with the same exalted seriousness as she now did herself. So there was nothing for it but to wait, with the perfect assurance that when those six months were over Lavington would keep his mouth shut until he died.

Esther sighed as she came to this conclusion for the hundredth time since seeing Stallard, and she glanced once more at the letters.

"Mother," she said, turning to Mrs. Moor, "I'm just going to write a refusal to this invitation for the Sea-Wall Opening. Shall you and Nellie go?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Moor, "but"—she paused, and the old vivid look and youthful flush transfigured her worn face. "Oh, Esther," she exclaimed, "do go too. You never allow me to attend the meetings, and I do so want to see you with the people honouring you. I *know* about your success, and it's the greatest joy I've ever had, but I'd love to *see* it—just for once—seeing's so different to knowing."

Esther looked into that vivid face, remembering the eager faith which had always been certain she would do something; and though the idea of attending the Sea-Wall Opening was most uncongenial to her for many reasons, she could now no more disappoint her mother than her mother could have unnecessarily disappointed her when she was a little child. There was such an in-

domitable child-likeness about Mrs. Moor's face in that moment.

"I'll go," said Esther slowly, fingering the Mayor's letter. "I'll go if you want it so much. I am not inclined for it to-day, but I daresay I shall feel quite differently when the time comes."

Mrs. Moor watched Esther write with a sort of timidity. She knew less about the Message than most people, just as those nearest usually do hear least; and she was almost afraid of her own child. It seemed a terrible as well as a glorious thing to be the mother of an inspired revealer, and as Esther's theories matured and developed she scarcely felt able to keep up with the little she knew of them.

"Esther," she said, "don't you think you ought to make your message clearer to Nellie and me? Why do you want to shut us out from privileges any one else may have?"

Esther frowned with a sort of weary puzzlement.

"I don't know," she said simply. "At first—well, I had reasons at first for not wanting you to be there—but now—when I'm certain of the Voices—when I hear them as plainly as I do you—I don't know why I can't have you and Nellie there. But I can't, mother. It would—it would stop all I wanted to say. I can feel that. I daren't try it."

"But you could tell me a little, dear. How you hear the Voices?" asked Mrs. Moor, with the new timidity that exasperated Esther and yet extraordinarily appealed to her.

"Don't talk about it, mother," she said, rising abruptly from the table. "I'm sorry, but I simply can't talk to you about it."

Mrs. Moor said no more, but the patience of her look as she turned to a basket of unmended stockings touched Esther afresh.

"Well," she said with an effort, "I hear the Voices at all times. Mostly when I'm alone, or with the students, but much more often now than at first. Last night I couldn't sleep for listening to them. They said the same words over and over and over again—as if to impress them on me." She paused; then a sudden feeling drove her across the room to her mother's side, and she knelt down with her head against that resting shoulder. "Oh, mother, sometimes I wish I could close the ears of my mind. I get so tired of listening."

Esther had been so undemonstrative all her life that Mrs. Moor was startled, but she just smoothed the rough hair off the thin brown forehead without speaking. It is only mothers who are so wonderfully wise as that, in when to speak and when to keep silence; and the little tired, fighting soul rested for a while with nothing to combat.

Nellie's footsteps sounded in the passage, and Esther went back to the table.

"Well, Nellie," said Mrs. Moor, "have you managed to get the blue wool in Shelton?"

"Yes," said Nellie, coming forward with her easy buoyancy of step, just the same as ever. "Look—a perfect match!"

She took off her hat, and then the morning light on her face showed where the difference really was; it had become the face of a woman.

"I saw Mary Astley," she went on. "Oh—and Stephen. He asked if we were going to the opening of the sea-wall. Are you, Esther?"

"Yes," Esther replied. "Mother wishes it, and I know Paul will go. What about father?"

At the mention of her husband Mrs. Moor looked disturbed.

"He won't go, of course. He wouldn't, anyway. But he is annoyed about your meetings. I told him just now that your marriage was put off——"

"Put off!" interrupted Nellie. "Why? You didn't tell me."

The colour came into her face, though she spoke quietly.

"We think it better to wait," said Esther, with that assumption of infallibility which was growing so habitual to her that it came out even in family intercourse. Nellie asked no more, and Mrs. Moor said nervously: "What shall you wear at the Sea-Wall Opening, Esther?"

So they talked about the details of Esther's purple gown until a message came from Mr. Moor asking her to go to him at once. She went, entering the room with an air of protest that did not escape him.

"Sit down, Esther," he said. "I suppose you think a prophetess should not be sent for. I ought to have treated you with the consideration that your mother and sister and lover do? Well, I suppose that's natural. But you can't deny I've been abnormally tolerant. I've

carried out my theory that anything's possible, and that every human being has a right to independent thought; which is more than most people do with their theories. But I've grown tired of the Hearers. I put up with them when I thought you were to be married next month, but now your marriage has once been mysteriously postponed, it may go on being mysteriously postponed. When one comes to dealing with the supernatural——"

"I'm quite ready to go, father," said Esther quickly. "The Grey House can be ready for me to move into in a fortnight's time. The caretaker has kept the rooms aired, and they don't need papering or painting at present. I can go there just as well as if—as if we'd been married in July."

Mr. Moor delicately fixed a fragment of glass into a fine old dish before he answered, and Esther chafed at the recognition that she was just exactly the same to him as the little fagged girl who had come back unsuccessful from seeking her fortune in a London office; no more and no less, to his curiously detached mind.

"Well, I think that will be the best plan," he said. "You're better able to support yourself than Ned—it's time he came back from the Pobsons—and this atmosphere of soulful bustle doesn't suit your mother or Nellie either—we'd all be better for a bit of solid quiet."

"You seem to think nothing of the wonderful power that has been given to a daughter of yours," said Esther.

Her father looked up at her for a moment, then bent over his work.

"I think as little as possible about anything," he said slowly. "I gave it up when I was as young as you, Esther. I found it was no use trying. One puzzle solved only led to another. A sort of hopeless maze. So I gave all puzzles up. I'm not, now, going to try to solve yours; but if ever it begins to be too much for you, you can come back here and give up too. There'll be a place for you, and no questions asked."

"If there were," said Esther, "I should leave Paul to answer them." For the hint, at this high moment of success and conscious inspiration, of creeping back home to an unnoticed place, was more than she could stand. "You've never cared a straw what we did—any of us," she continued. "You're not like a father."

Mr. Moor looked up with the expression in his cold blue eyes that had usually kept open criticism away from him as by the point of a sharp sword; then he rose and opened the door politely for his daughter, and she went out with a feeling of defeat oddly at war with her conviction that she *could* make no mistakes.

It was very reassuring after that to go up the steep steps into the long granary and sit in her accustomed place with the light on her, and the dim shadows around, and the cooing of the pigeons overhead. By and by Mary Astley came in, all in a glow of devotion and adoring friendship, such as a girl feels for a woman older and more notorious than herself, and she began to administer that flattery which Esther now craved from every one with whom she came in contact.

"I've copied out the Message you gave me last night

when you returned from The Grey House," she said, her voice thrilling with awe and worship. "Oh, Esther, I feel the honour almost too much. It's wonderful—to think what I was last year—and now to be your chosen helper—to go down to posterity as the one who wrote the words fresh from your lips."

She paused, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling; different indeed to the dull, purposeless girl whose face had matched the pillows on which she lay so long. Now she had no time to think of herself, because all her thoughts were engrossed by Esther's Message and the actual hard work she did in connection with it. Her time and thoughts were filled from morning to night by an occupation that lifted her clean out of herself.

Esther glanced at Mary with a new appreciation of her sincere and complete devotion; and the thought first occurred to her that she would like to have it always at hand. The old feeling which used to prompt kings to surround themselves with flatterers often does rise up from the past, in those who have gained a sudden power; the new king can do no wrong, but it's pleasant to have some one there, ready to keep on saying so.

"Mary," said Esther abruptly, after a long pause, "would you like to stay with me at The Grey House until I am married?"

"I'd give years of my life to do it," Mary replied.

But things cannot be arranged like that, even between a teacher and a disciple all aflame with faith and reverence, for Stephen Astley had to be informed of this plan, though he had not the power to prevent it, and the news brought

him over to Dunholme next day after business, in a state of worried indignation.

Nellie sat alone in the living-room when he was shown in, and she rose with an air of surprise that deepened the flush already visible on his finely cut features; though she had replied to him civilly in the street when they met, her manner said now, as plainly as words could speak:

"To what do we owe the honour of this visit?" He replied to that, not to her real remark about the weather.

"I know I'm not welcome here," he said, with a direct simplicity which was rather dignified, "but I had to put that on one side. Mary has nobody in the world to look after her but me, and though she is independent actually, I feel I must do what I can for her. I can't let her go and live with your sister and get this Message business on her brain. She was such an excitable child."

"Has Esther done her any harm so far?" asked Nellie, neither sitting herself nor asking him to do so.

"No," said Astley, "that's where it comes in—I'm worried out of my life—I feel it's all wrong and yet it's done her good. No one can deny that."

"Why not leave the matter alone, then?" said Nellie, more kindly, seeing how bothered and anxious he was. "Why harass yourself about a thing that has had excellent results so far, and that you can't alter?"

But every drop of blood Stephen inherited from those old Astleys in High Street revolted from such a course. If a thing was wrong, it *was* wrong, no matter what the result. He was at the opposite end of the pole from those who allow what they think evil, if good comes of it.

"My idea was to beg you and Mrs. Moor to use your influence with your sister," he hesitated.

There was a long pause, during which Nellie did not reply and Astley frowned at the carpet.

"I can't tell you how I hate to think of it," he continued. "Mary making a spectacle of herself, relating her experiences, dragging out into the public gaze all those things that should be sacred if they are real. A man doesn't talk about his love for his wife—how he first felt it—how it grew—much less about his love for his Maker. I can't understand it."

"There's nothing new in that," said Nellie, willing to comfort him if possible in spite of her loyalty to Esther. "You find that going on in any little wayside chapel, and you don't wonder at it there."

"No—no," agreed Astley reluctantly, "of course that is so." Then he went on again. "But it's Mary—mother's daughter and father's—doing it. They would have been as outraged as if they'd seen her go down the street improperly clad, like a shameful dream——"

"That's how *you* feel," said Nellie quietly. "You think people should keep their souls covered up like their bodies. You feel it's an impropriety not to. Well, that's a matter of opinion; but nobody can call it a sin. The fact is, you resent it as a want of delicacy in a woman belonging to you, and it hurts your pride."

He looked at her with a slowly changing expression.

"Nellie, you wouldn't have talked like that a year ago," he said. "You're different. I begin to think the same kind of trouble has been ageing both of us."

"What kind? I've no troubles," said Nellie, startled.

"I only dare to speak of it," said Astley, with the extraordinary want of caution to which his cautious nature was liable at rare moments, "because I want to begin to hope again. I heard a rumour that Stallard made love to you first and to Esther afterwards, and I contradicted it, though I guessed it was true. I knew it was; and I'm selfish enough to be glad that you cared for a beggarly hound you couldn't marry, because now you may turn to me. A better man would have filled your heart for all your life whether you'd married him or not, but now there's perhaps a little hope——"

"No," said Nellie quickly, "there's no hope, Stephen, and you're too good to be married without loving. Now about Mary—you have to allow her to do as she likes, so it's no use trying to interfere, and mother would be ready to turn you out of the house by force if you hinted a word against Esther and the Message. You'll only make much worse of it and create more ill-feeling between yourself and Mary if you try to stop her living with Esther."

"Nellie," said Astley, taking her hand to say farewell, "do you believe in the Message?"

Nellie snatched her hand away.

"Of course I do," she cried. "Do you think I would *not* believe in my only sister?"

"So it rests on that?" said Astley. Then, as she said nothing, he took his leave.

A fortnight later Esther said good-bye to the granary, and the quiet yard, and the square rooms which had always been home, and went to that new home which was to be

departed.

CHAPTER XVII

THE morning of the Sea-Wall Opening was splendid, but the very brightness of sunshine, and clear air, and singing birds, seemed to drive Esther further back into the dull languor in which she had lain since the beginning of dawn. The time slipped on—five—six—seven—eight. Still she lay quiescent, just watching the sunlight strengthen over the trees beyond her window.

At last there was a knock at the door, and Mary Astley entered, her delicate colouring refreshed by night and silence like the garden outside.

"I've come to see what time you would like your——" she began. Then she broke off. "Why, how ill you look, how awfully tired——"

Esther lay motionless, but turned her solemn eyes on Mary.

"I am never ill. I am never tired," she said sternly. "But the Voices have been speaking to me through the night, and I need repose and silence."

Esther's stilted manner of talking, so unlike the blunt Burdock fashion, made Mary realize more fully than ever the great change which had taken place, and she drew near the bed with a sort of hesitating deference. Still her affection for Esther, the tired little woman on the bed,

was still greater than her awe of her leader. They seemed, oddly enough, in the back of her mind to be two people, though she knew they were one.

"Don't you—don't you think you had better give up hearing the Voices for a time, Esther? Don't you think the constant strain is telling on your strength?"

Esther closed her eyes, while a wave of intense lassitude passed over her. The fact that she had longed in the night to still those Voices made her more determined than ever to be equal to her high calling. She must not let herself slip down, or the whole fabric of her life would slip down with her.

"I am not tired," she said. "Quiet and meditation will soon restore me. I shall be ready to drive with you into Shelton at three o'clock."

She lay very still after Mary went out, until the staid housemaid came in with the breakfast; for the mere thought of the effort she would have to make in the afternoon caused her heart to beat uncomfortably. She was indeed tired out. The strain of the past few months had told deeply on her by no means robust physique, and now that the first excitement was waning, she was unable to sleep at night. Nervous exhaustion was near at hand, but her intense and vivid faith in herself kept it at bay, because real faith in anything—even the wrong thing—is always able to work miracles. Faith is not shorn of its power when wrongly directed, and that only shows the indestructible vitality of it. It's there—*there*—for us to use well or ill, with the wonderful freedom which God has given to those who are not His slaves, but His children—

just as freely as the sunlight—not apportioned out to good or evil.

So Esther gathered strength from this faith in herself and her own mission, though it was all based on a delusion caused by overstrung nerves and egoism run mad, whilst she lay there, watching the sun creep up to high noon above the garden trees.

After lunch she rose and went out to the hired carriage in which Mrs. Moor and Nellie had called for her. She wore a purple gown, that accentuated the odd intensity of her pale face, and a supreme assurance as rare as it is dominating seemed to make a hedge round her, which Mrs. Moor looked over with exultant deference, but which caused Nellie to become more gently reserved than ever—not aggressively; only like a flower that preferred to keep the petals folded. She never ceased to be vaguely puzzled and uneasy about her sister's mission, and only believed in it because she *would* believe in it. Her common sense constantly warred with her loyalty, and she never tried to know more about the Hearers than the surface fact that they cured sickness by a new kind of faith-healing.

As they drove through the pleasant country and then down the long familiar road where Esther had often trudged through wind and rain to work, the thoughts of all three were bound to notice the difference. Mrs. Moor's heart swelled with joy and pride as she gazed at the livery of the coachman, and heard the spirited sound of horses' hoofs on the hard road; for it was a good pair that Stallard had hired, he was excellent at such matters.

royal person—you who tramped it r
the weather wasn't fit to turn a dog
lieve it! I feel as if I must wake u
dream."

Esther drew back from her mother's l
of offence. She instinctively disliked t
go back to that time when she was of
inflated egoism would not stand it.
moment as if she would like always t
who had never known her anything but

"Oh, that part of my life hardly ex
said, in the new artificial way which
since she *believed* in her mission. "It w
of waiting, like the music before the dra

Nellie glanced from her mother to E
hotly.

"It lasted for twenty-five years," she
think you ought to forget that."

Esther's eyes widened, glittered, as
one to the other. There was a sort of

The fear of it grazed her senses like a seen thing, and she half rose in her seat staring out at the storm-beaten tree. Then a curious light came into her listening face—she heard the Voices, faint, far-off, but unmistakable. And though they only repeated dim echoes from creeds she had read, or heard of, and forgotten, they seemed to her the Voices of Inspiration.

She leaned back calmly against the blue cushions, and again felt herself to be the direct Messenger from the Creator to his people — not awed by it, nor made terribly humble, but filled with a measureless satisfaction.

And indeed she had done a tremendous thing. She had adapted the most gigantic flattery ever conceived by the human mind to the needs of her fellow-men. They wanted to be free from suffering, they wanted to be perfect, they wanted to be deathless, so she told them they could be. She had unconsciously grasped the fact that all the wonderful things are simple, and had flattered humanity in such a crude and wholesale manner that no other creed could go one better. She had created a corner in the flattery of the soul.

So the people of Lowport and Shelton, whose very worth had made them a little vulnerable to flattery of this kind—for if any one had a right to be thought divine *they* had, was the inward feeling—these people were prepared to give a very cordial welcome to a person who thought so highly of the human race. They did not exactly believe the Message, nor does a plain woman quite believe she possesses an unusual kind of beauty when

so tremendously modern that they
to look on at it.

Mrs. Moor and Nellie followed v
committee, and Mrs. Moor was mad
moment, for all the pricks and stings
soul had borne in her lifetime. He
her the power to feel on the crest of
no one else could, in the crowd about l
whose weary body would scarcely
her mind put upon it of realizing tha
thing at last. She'd reached the prize
only now it seemed no adventure at all
God to find a Holy Grail.

She stood in the sunshine, with
in the sea air, and the band playi
the stone breakwater itself. A litt
her own against something so treme
elements of death and pain. But
courage of the unhinged—not the ga
venture in which she had started out to

on earth Esther had ever learned to talk like that. Esther—who was always so direct and simple.

"It's a mutual privilege, I'm sure," said the Mayor, rising to the occasion. "We've got a glorious day, too—glorious. Just as it should be." He felt that he and the public generally had got their rights for once—it always pricked the Lowport electors unconsciously to feel they could never have a finger in the management of the weather office. "Ah," he concluded, "here comes your—your intended." He had been going to say "young gentleman," but it seemed wrong, somehow, for a Messenger to have a young gentleman.

Stallard approached with the upright carriage and frank, shining look which marked him out from the crowd and would always make him appear—whatever he did—a hero of romance. His were the sort of looks which gain women without effort and keep them without kindness, and always will.

"My dear," he said, softly and yet distinctly enough for any one to hear, as he took Esther's hand. Then he walked on with her and the Mayor, and every woman round thought what a perfect greeting. Whereas he really had felt, for once, with Nellie's clear eyes upon him, at a loss for the right thing to say.

They arrived finally at the seats provided for Esther and the Mayor near the end of the sea-wall. There was a little hedge of shrubs round it, high enough to form a shelter from the wind, and a carpet laid down to give an air of almost royal seclusion.

The Mayor escorted Esther to a chair and left her with

daughter's.

"Oh, Esther!" she said, and r
pride and joy she was feeling in
had believed in but herself, for it wa
mother-pride. "Oh, Esther, aren't
She could not say any more than t

"Oh, yes, I am very glad," s
Stallard with her eyes as he went
"I see now that it advances the I
to do these things. I must take t
Message."

Mrs. Moor felt as if she had be
a physical hand. This was not th
always going to do something, but
done it and was curiously change
ment.

"Esther, you've an absolute belief
she said suddenly. "You haven't th
yourself?"

Esther turned on her —"

"Oh, I don't know what made me say it. I expect I've got nervous and flustered with all this——"

"Never ask me that question again," said Esther. "I should have thought that you of all people would be most ready to believe."

Silence followed; then, with a little quiver of the lip, Mrs. Moor rose and went away to join the Pobsons.

But Esther was so engrossed with herself that she had no attention to spare for her mother, and she sat alone on the seat for a few moments listening to the remarks of people behind the hedge of shrubs, who did not realize she was within hearing, gratified to catch phrases about herself on every hand, and noticing the constant glances in her direction from those who passed in front of the carpet. She gathered it all up like incense burned to that tremendous egotism of hers which was almost satisfied at last.

Her lassitude departed, and she had never felt so curiously alive. She seemed able to get hold of the very essence of life within her as she sat listening to the vague chatter about herself that went on behind the shrubs.

"Wonderful woman. You mayn't agree, but there *must* be something in it. Look at Miss Astley. That's her sister over there, Miss Nellie Moor——" Then the speakers lowered their voices a little until Esther could only just catch the words, "Oh—thought he was going in for her at one time. No—no idea of it. Well," cried out a younger voice, "I saw Stallard kissing Nellie Moor on the cliff one night last winter, plain as I see you. What do you

little crowd mingled like the glass
Then it cleared somewhat, and she
approaching her.

"What is it?" he said, bending
upset, Esther."

"Oh, nothing," she said faint
beside her, sheltering her with h
tection.

She rested in that for a little whi
relief.

"It's very good to have you to ta
she said.

"It's what I hope to spend my l
hope to spend my life in guarding
and very precious to the world as
not regret if I have to give up my ot
of that—if I have to become a lay-l
the Great Brotherhood of Common l

Esther leaned back and glanced fr
eyes to the sunlit crowd

Well, she wouldn't be troubled by a chance word—how could she be in the face of that devotion? Every one looked alike in the dark—so many couples had kissed in the dark upon the cliff. It was an insult to suspect him or Nellie.

The member of committee broke in on her swift thoughts with a deferential greeting.

"We're going to have a little surprise," he said. "It's an operatic singer down on his luck—drink or something—but a bit of a genius. He sings on the Parade here in the evenings. Ah, Mr. Stallard has gone to speak to him, I see. And there's Mr. Stephen Astley with your sister. Well, we shall have a treat, I'm told."

All underneath the man's words and Esther's reply ran the thought, nebulous and undefined:

"Could there be anything in it? There *couldn't*—could there? Oh, there never, never could!"

And she stopped at that, as the singer took his place to sing the usual doggerel with a waltz refrain. It began, of course, with a "Do you remember, dear, when first we met?" and at the second verse the lovers parted in a minor key, while the third naturally reverted to the waltz refrain and a promise of happiness in eternity.

Esther was moved by the singing, which was really fine, though the voice showed signs of wear. Her emotions were ready to be touched, but the member of committee was musical and superior. "Well," he said, "just look here; people stirred by an idiotic song like that. Doesn't it show what sentimental fools English people are, after all?"

they respond to the big things alway
chance to understand them."

"Just so," said the member of
fortably. "I see Mr. Stallard is asl
Shall I suggest the man sings us one
That will be new, anyway."

"Oh, yes," said Esther, and the me
gladly escaped. He could say he ha
Messenger, and he liked that better tha

Esther watched the singer glance rou
—a fat, dissipated face, something lik
the breeding left out—and then she lo
clear features and shining hair. He wa
and Astley stood stern and speechless c
He was not going to leave her alone wit
felt furiously angry and uncomfortable.

"An original song called 'Suspicion,'
man in an important bellow.

The word shot straight into Esther'
everybody knows how, who has

in a hall showed signs of wear rose very pure and exquisite, softened by distance and the open air. Above the lapping of the sea the words floated out.

"When you are absent I have doubts and fears."

Stallard and Astley both watched Nellie, who stood with her face turned towards the singer. She had grown pale with emotion, and her eyes widened and darkened; she looked so sweet and tender that both men unconsciously drew nearer to her. They wanted to keep even a song from troubling her at that moment. Esther tried to look away from the little group, but her eyes seemed chained to it.

How that uneasy question stirred again.

Could there be any truth in that chance remark which she had heard?

All the bitterness of her youth rose up with the remembrance that men always wanted to kiss Nellie.

Another few bars of music, then the second verse.

"But in your presence, all suspicion wanes,
I have no memory for former pains,
And in a sea of thoughts but one remains—
I love you!"

Esther looked into her lover's face, but he was looking at Nellie's lips which trembled.

"You'd wonder how a man like that, would know all that," said Nellie, drawing a long breath.

"Genius doesn't *know*," said Stallard, rather pale himself. "It's only allowed to make pictures for other people of what it has never experienced."

"Come along," said Astley sharply; "there is Mrs. Moor waiting for us, and your sister is leaving."

[illegible] of her mother's fa
the wonderful glow of happiness v
her back to the time when that wa
believer. She alighted from the car
to Mrs. Moor.

"Mother," she whispered, "I wa
to say good-bye to you. How could
you have liked it all. Good-bye, dea

Then she returned to the carriage, a
with Stallard beyond the crowds, b
foot-passengers, finally into the rest a
beside Masterby Wood. She lay bac
without speaking, utterly tired out, a
newspaper; but by the time they wer
dock's yard she roused herself to speak

"There's Ishmael Dixon hovering
again," she said. "He is always
pigeon-cote."

"Is he?" said Stallard absently.
did you think of that chap's singing?

With that her

"You'll never believe," she said with a half laugh and an attempted carelessness, "you never would believe, Paul, what a silly remark I heard this afternoon."

"Oh, I'll believe anything in that line," said Stallard, suppressing a yawn.

"Well," Esther continued, "some one in the crowd behind me actually said—actually said" (how her tiresome heart would beat!) "that they'd seen you kissing Nellie." She tried to laugh again, but was so breathless that it sounded much more like a sob.

For one startled moment there was silence, then Stallard rustled his paper and laughed too.

"That *is* almost too silly to be believed," he agreed. "Ah, well, so long as you don't mind, dear, I don't suppose it matters. Fools will talk."

"I wonder what made them say such a thing," pursued Esther, after a pause.

Stallard glanced keenly at her from the shadow of the newspaper.

"Oh, gossip rises as the wind does, nobody knows where," he said lightly. Then as The Grey House came in sight, "Dearest, what do other people matter to you and me when we look at the home where we shall live together?"

He kissed her, which he did less often than Esther had imagined lovers did; but she pretended to herself that she would have hated a lover who made her remember that love was an affair of the flesh rather than of the spirit.

"We'll start the New Year together here," she said.

[illegible], said Stallard sc
you up for six months at the dict
the sake of your work. My pri
you won't lower yours to go to him

"But you seemed content," i
"What has suddenly made you b

"Because I want you, dear,
"I want you now for my very own.

The carriage turned into the ga
between the trees where rooks flew
cry that holds the very meaning of l
and quiet sleep.

"Did you like my dress?" said E

"No," said Stallard. Then, afte
colour suited your spiritual look. I
so full of meaning. There's no one li

No wonder Esther believed in him.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHEN Stallard left The Grey House that night, Esther walked with him as far as the gate. It was very still, with a wonderful bright moon, and she watched him go down the road on his bicycle, before turning to go back to the house. As she passed the gardener's cottage she heard sounds from the open window and a light suddenly shone out across the drive.

"Oh, is that you, 'm?" cried the gardener's wife. "I have Johnny here so bad with earache I don't know what to do with him. I've believed all the afternoon he'd be better, and *made* him believe—and yet——"

She paused. She was an ardent Hearer or she would not have been where she was, but her ardour a good deal outran her understanding of the Message.

"I'll come in," said Esther.

So she went into the kitchen, which seemed dark enough in the light of one candle after the full moonlight outside, and the lad came stumbling down the stairs wrapped in a shawl, a slight discharge oozing from one ear, his eyes glazed with pain and approaching delirium.

"I've done nothing and given him nothing," said the woman with a queer sort of pride. "I've just had faith and told him to be still in his bed, but he won't; he keeps getting up and wandering about."

Her thin fanatic face glowed with a positive joy in the suffering that racked her when she looked at her son—it was the old splendid desire to suffer for God's sake perverted and distorted—and she smiled the nervous smile of the Hearer in a pathetic desire to show that there *was* no pain.

"My dear boy," said Esther, laying her hand on the lad's shoulder and looking into his poor brilliant eyes, "my dear boy—you're quite well—quite happy. Just think of that—lean on it—rest your whole mind on it—and go to bed again. Remember—you're well—you're happy—you're at rest. Now go back to bed again."

At the quiet command in her tone he turned round and stumbled up the narrow stairs again.

"Don't go after him, or let your thoughts dwell upon his suffering," said Esther to the woman. "You go to bed too, sure, *sure* of his health, and happiness and quiet sleep. If you let uneasy thoughts gather round him you keep his pain alive instead of making it disappear. Pain is only in the mind—his—yours—mine—destroy it in the mind and you destroy it in the body."

"But can you?" asked the woman, echoing the question of the thinking world.

"Yes," said Esther quite simply. "Good night, your boy will be well to-morrow if you go to sleep in faith."

The door closed, the light was extinguished, Esther walked back alone up the path to The Grey House with a calm sense of her own greatness which was more uplifting than any previous excitement. She had been chosen out from

all the world to convey this wonderful Message from the Source of all Life to the people of the world. She stood between It and them. She was the last and greatest of the inspired teachers.

She saw the moonlight round her like a glory and heard the Voices chant softly :

"There is no sin—there is no pain—there is no death."

She felt in herself the well-spring of Immortality.

Then the door opened and Mary Astley came out to meet her.

Esther was not inclined to rest after the excitement of the day and the curious exaltation of the moments just past ; so the two women went into the bedroom and sat on the broad window-sill looking out over the moonlit garden. A wave of measureless content passed over Esther as she sat there. She'd got everything at last. For the second time that day she realized it—only now more fully than before.

Mary was longing to ask about the Sea-Wall Opening, but she looked at Esther's face and dared not break in upon those thoughts with trivial questions as to who wore what, and how people looked and talked. She wanted to know if Stephen were there, and all the old friends she had refrained from meeting because of the embarrassment she felt she might cause her brother. She wanted to know if Nellie wore her pink hat, but instead she tried to fix her mind upon the Infinite and succeeded, because she was one of those to whom the unseen would always in the end be more real than the seen. She lacked the just balance.

So the minds of both women grew attuned to the same exalted mood, and they were ready for any visible manifestation of the supernatural.

Together they gazed out across the wide lawn to the trees at the further end, and they were not even startled to see a flutter of white draperies under the shadow of the cedar, and a figure moving with swift wavering steps through the moonlight across the lawn. They only waited with a quick indrawn breath of ecstasy for another manifestation of the spirit. The Voices no doubt had done their part. The Messengers were now to appear in visible form. Mary, under the delusion of her fanatic belief, was not less unbalanced than Esther with real hysterical mania. They both watched the oncoming figure with indescribable solemn joy.

It fluttered nearer with quick, uncertain steps, stayed beneath their window, they leaned forth.

It was poor Johnny who had wandered forth delirious with earache.

Esther drew back and flung down the window with a horrible revulsion of feeling. That same strange fear of something that might belittle her, tear her down from her throne if she were to see it, which had just drifted across her mind when she passed the little hill on her way to Shelton that afternoon, came back again now with redoubled force. Then she forced herself to remember that the Message was inspired—had always been from the beginning, though then it seemed confused with falsities that cleared themselves away in the light of a fuller understanding.

She *was* the Inspired Messenger!

"I must go out and look after that boy," whispered Mary, also unhinged and trembling.

"No," cried Esther. "No, that shows you have not sufficient faith. Stay here and pray for him."

She had to assure herself as well as Mary that she was inspired, all-powerful.

"Stay here—he will go home."

"But the brook, it's deep—swollen with the rain in June," sobbed Mary.

"Wait," said Esther. "Wait for an hour, then you may go to the cottage. You will find he is safely there."

For a whole hour they waited there—Esther prone on her bed and absolutely silent—then Mary crept down the stairs and through the garden, knocking urgently on the cottage door, which stood a little open.

"Johnny?" she gasped when the woman looked out of the window. She could not utter a word more.

The woman gave a cry and ran into the other bedroom; it was some time before she came down to the door, but when she did she too looked puzzled and startled.

"He's in bed all right and the abscess in his ear seems to have burst now, but he's been out of doors in his nightshirt. He's got bits of leaf and earth on him, and his feet are like the ground. But he's healed. It's a wonderful thing. A time back I should have sent for the doctor."

"But you'll stop with him now!" exclaimed Mary, still breathless. "The brook—he might get in there——"

"No," said the woman, "I shall do as Miss Moor told me. I shall leave him in faith. I believe in the Message like I do in my own life."

The moon had set now—Mary and the woman seemed to stand very much alone in the darkness of the quiet night.

"You've a wonderful faith," said Mary. "Ah, what would you do without it now?"

"If I stopped believing in Miss Moor I should stop believing in anything," said the woman.

So Mary went back to the house and fell asleep too with the most absolute faith in the revelation of the Message. For her, too, this world was a beautiful place, as well as the world to come, because Charlie Moor's letters from Australia were beginning to hint of a possible home-coming in the autumn, and she wondered—as girls will wonder before love is spoken.

Next morning Esther sat in the garden with the exaltation of the night before still surrounding her. Dimly from the road she could hear the tramp of horses' feet, the jingling of little bells, and the sound of a Methodist hymn; so she knew that the school treat from Jane Burdock's chapel was passing by to Shelton with the farm children and men and women belonging to the villages about The Grey House. She had reached the moment of strange peace which the opium-eater knows before the terrors begin.

Once Mary came, but she saw she was not wanted and went away again. A pile of correspondence lay on the garden table before Esther, but she left it unopened. The

blue sky, the green leaves, the consciousness of inspiration and immortality filled those still moments to overflowing and left no room for anything else.

A gap in the trees showed the blue smoke rising in a thin straight column from Jane Burdock's farm, one of the pigeons from the wooden pigeon-loft flew across the sky. Esther's peace was faintly disturbed, as a still lake by the very first faint ripple of coming storm.

Coo—coo! Coo—coo!

The old granary at home, with Ishmael Dixon speaking there, flitted lightly across the screen of her thoughts.

Coo—coo! Coo—coo!

Tom Dixon had heard that sound when he was dying; it had mingled with his memories of the Message as it did with hers.

Coo—coo! Coo—coo!

If only the monotonous noise would cease. It was just the little pin-prick that disturbed a measureless content; she got up and went into the house. But a little while before sunset, when the pigeons had gone home, she came out again and sat in the same place under the trees. The column of smoke from Jane Burdock's chimney no longer rose, whoever remained in charge of the house had evidently allowed the fire to go out. The whole countryside seemed wonderfully quiet. The sound of footsteps on the road could be heard a long while before they turned into the drive by the cottage. Esther did not trouble to look up, the shambling tread declared it to be the step of a labourer on the land—some man on an errand no doubt.

She turned the pages of "The Message," a revised copy

which, most exquisitely bound, had been sent to her that morning.

The phrases sounded finer and more rhythmical now, she thought, than when she had spoken them. She had not realized their power.

Half aloud she began to repeat the monotonous phrases which, thus spoken, had the odd soothing effect of all incantations.

"Miss Burdock wants to see you."

The words grated across her peaceful meditations like the scrape of iron upon stone, and she saw Ishmael Dixon standing before her.

"Miss Burdock—wants to see *me?*" she said in a sort of daze, as if she were waking. Then more decidedly: "I think you are mistaken. What does she want to see me for?"

"She's taken badly. All the servants is at the school treat. I can't do nothing with her."

The man was very pale, and his knotted hands were shaking so that Esther felt obliged to believe him. Something serious must be the matter. She jumped up hastily and started down the drive, but Ishmael remained standing.

"Come along," she said sharply. "What are you waiting for?"

"Nowt," he said. "You—you understand she was in the—the loft. I'd gotten her to go up there to see what a fine job I'd made on it. She's there now."

He repeated the words like a lesson, his gloomy eyes fixed on the road before him. Then stopped short and barred her way.

"Look here," he said. "You killed my son Tom. You know that. You killed my son Tom."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Esther sharply. "Here, let me get on."

She felt no fear of the man though he looked sufficiently alarming; but physical cowardice had never been one of her faults. Dixon stood aside muttering to himself.

"She's a witch. Witches knows no fear. Witches ought to be burnt. It's the law. Witches oughter be burnt."

So he tramped doggedly after her to the farm, followed her up the ladder leading to the loft, turned the new key in the strong lock, and left her in the dim place lighted only by one square of glass, where there was no Jane Burdock—nothing but bundles of sticks and straw half seen in the dimness, and the ceaseless "Coo—coo" of the disturbed pigeons overhead.

. . . . . .

For a moment, as if impelled by some fear of what was in the place, Ishmael Dixon crept back into the shadow of the wagon-house, then he muttered something and came forth again, and the one pane of glass looking towards the wood shone red in the beginning of the sunset as if it were a signal of danger. He crept in among the straw and wood he had been storing in the shed below the loft. For weeks he had gathered it, day after day, lying awake to think how it would burn, laughing aloud in the night, as he never did in the day, to think who would burn with it.

The witch—the witch who had killed his son—he had

laughed as he fancied her cries going up through the grey wood smoke.

All the inbred horror of the witch that lurked in his blood from a thousand generations arose and clamoured in him as he struck a match and set fire to the sun-dried straw.

. . . . . .

For a moment panic seized Esther, and she flung herself at the door, shaking it and bruising her fingers. Then the old Burdock courage united with the exalted assurance of the Hearers' creed to restore her composure, and she drew back into the middle of the room. Her heart was throbbing in the painful way she had experienced more than once lately, but she leaned against the wall near the window and began to wait with what patience she could for some one to pass. She held a piece of wood in her hand ready to break the window and attract attention. Dixon was half crazy, no doubt, she would have to ask her aunt to send him away. What an unpleasant experience. But already she began to picture the account of it that would appear in all the papers. She was very conscious of her calmness and courage. A faint smell of burning wood crept in on the quiet air of the July evening through the cracks in the brickwork somewhere. Dixon burning rubbish in the yard, no doubt. She began to fancy the very words in which those paragraphs would be written.

. . . . . .

Ishmael Dixon stood in the doorway of the shed below stirring the burning straw with a long pole, and throwing

on dry bits of wood as the flames strengthened. Every now and then he threw back his head and laughed.

. . . . . .

Suddenly a thin puff of smoke came up through the thin boarding of the floor where Esther stood, and she crashed the wood through the window—though nobody passed on the silent road—for the loft was on fire.

CHAPTER XIX

THE pigeons flew clamouring from the loft; and for a second Esther stood motionless, gathering herself together. She would not be afraid. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had stood unharmed amid the flames—she in her own person carried on the miraculous power of the prophets and saints. She was the living exponent of the faith that subdues all matter to the influence of will. The flames could not harm her.

She stood with pale, rapt face and burning eyes, fighting the forces of nature; an adventuress indeed.

The smoke grew thicker and the choking smell of burning wood filled the loft—she began to cough violently and tears streamed down her cheeks—still she believed.

. . . . . .

Ishmael Dixon crept into the shelter of the wagon-house and watched, expecting to see Esther's agonized face at the opening made by the broken window; but it did not appear. He listened for her cries to mingle with the clamour of the pigeons—he wanted to hear them together as his son had heard that incessant "Coo—coo" mingled with the burning delirium in which he died.

. . . . . .

Faintness and a sense of suffocation drove Esther to the

little window, and she could feel the hot flames close upon her—a red tongue licked out at the flounce of her gown and she could smell the sickly, singeing odour of it. That destroyed her courage when nothing else would. Her faith in herself and her Message began to waver—she might be going to die—she might be going to die. The fumes choked her now, and she forced her terrible face through the window; the faintness was overpowering her. With a last effort her soul fled to the one belief that had been hers through all her life, and she shrieked out towards the woods:

"Mother!"

. . . . . .

Dixon watched her agonized face in the window with the fierce joy of satisfied revenge. He'd made up for Tom's suffering. He'd soon have made up for Tom's death.

Then that cry rang out, and he stood rigid with the look of one who had heard something arresting and terrible.

"Mother"—Why, she was Mrs. Moor's bairn, the same as Tom was his. Mrs. Moor that he'd always liked—who'd sent the beef-tea to Tom.

It wasn't only the Messenger he was killing, but Mrs. Moor's bairn—same as Tom was his.

A horrible doubt seized him as he stood there. Was he justified in killing another woman's bairn? He hadn't thought of that. And all this time the flames were creeping higher.

He took out the new key, looked at it on his palm; no more dramatic than he had ever been, but simply consider-

ing if it were right to kill Esther now he had remembered she was Mrs. Moor's bairn, same as Tom was his and his missus's.

The flames were getting hold of the steps that led to the door; if he were going to get her out it must be done now.

Suddenly he remembered a night a long time ago when Mrs. Moor and Esther had driven over to bring his wife some jelly when she was ill—Miss Moor was a little lass then, and his missus had said she looked an oddling.

Again the old thought drummed through his muddled brain.

She was Mrs. Moor's bairn same as Tom was his. He'd a right to burn a witch who would not let Tom have a doctor and get cured; but had he a right to kill Mrs. Moor's bairn?

Slowly and deliberately, though the fire gained every minute, he mounted the wooden steps. He was not conscious of any remorse. The right thing had become a wrong thing—that was all. So he turned the key and opened the door to find Esther pressed against the further wall, unconscious, her woollen clothing already beginning to smoulder, burning sullenly, but not yet in flames. Then, he carried her down, pulled off the smouldering skirt, and took her into the house. After that he assured himself that she was in no further danger of fire, and left her on the bed in Miss Burdock's room.

After all it seemed it was wrong to kill her. Well, he hadn't killed her.

He did not turn to look at her again, but went back to watch the burning loft and see that it did not injure the straw stacks in the yard.

Some time after sunset the gaily decorated wagon stopped at the gate with its merry, tired load of people, and Dixon came out into the road. There was nothing left of the fire but smouldering refuse when Miss Burdock shouted anxious questions to him as he stood in the gateway.

"Loft's been on fire," he said as soon as he could make himself heard. "It's burnt to the ground. Now I'm going home to my supper."

"No, you're not," answered Miss Burdock, tramping in, out of earshot of the merry-makers. "You've been so pig-headed and foolish about keeping sticks and straw and things in that wooden shed that you're going to stop and hear about it. Whole place might have been burned down. You're not fit to trust nor to leave, Ishmael. Worse than any farm lad I could have left."

Dixon tramped after her, stolid and stupefied—the emotions and passions of his nature had died down for good after the unhealthy activity produced by his son's death, and he looked a very old man now that he was no longer vivified by his mania for revenge.

"You haven't much cause to grumble," he muttered. "I've kept the fire off the stacks."

He had once meant to tell her straight out when she came home how he'd burned the witch who had bewitched his son—it sounded splendid in his thoughts as he brooded over it on a hundred sleepless nights—he'd told her that

and defied her a thousand times as he pottered about the shed listening to the maddening "Coo—coo" of the pigeons.

But now it was all over, his courage oozed away, leaving him a very shaken old man who didn't want to be found out and sent away. He'd done what he had so long brooded over, and the achievement brought a slackening of fibres as it always will—he realized that he'd had no tea. He wanted to get home and see his wife and have his supper and go to bed. He felt he could sleep soundly that night after months of restless sleeping.

So just as his mistress entered the door he touched her arm.

"Hey, missus, I've summat to tell you," he said with the cunning look of the child or old person who is trying to drag a herring across the trail of some misdemeanour. "Miss Esther—she—she come looking round and got caught in the fire."

"Miss Esther—here?" cried Miss Burdock. "What could she be doing here?"

The cunning deepened—he began to be horribly afraid of being found out.

"She—why—why——" a solution struck him. "Why, she allus liked playing here when she was little. Mebbe she thought she'd have a last look round again when you was out of the way at the school treat. Eh! I mind how she's played in that loft many a time," and he shook his head, fear lending him a power to deceive he had never known before. "I was fair flabbergasted when I see her white face screeching at the window——"

A sick spasm of trembling indeed shook him. How had he ever dared? The thing seemed incredible now the possession of his idea had left him. He and his old woman would have to go—perhaps to prison.

"I—I think she was a bit off her head," he gasped. "She'd got herself fastened in. I'd—I'd a job to get her out afore she was burnt to death. I took her in and laid her on your bed. She—she owes a deal to me, Miss Burdock."

But Miss Burdock was across the passage before he ceased speaking, and ran more lightly than seemed possible with such a huge bulk, up the stairs to her bedroom.

Esther lay on the bed just as Ishmael had thrown her down, her head hanging a little over the further side, her face like death.

Miss Burdock pulled away the pillows from the hard mattress and lifted Esther into a more comfortable position, then felt her pulse. It beat very feebly, but still it did beat; Miss Burdock fetched brandy and ordered hot-water bottles, and closed the door upon the inquisitive maids.

"Go to The Grey House and say Miss Moor is resting here; she wants a little quiet. She will stay the night," commanded the mistress, and nobody dared ask any questions.

It was quite dark when Esther regained consciousness. The tired maids were all asleep after their day at Shelton.

Ishmael had gone home so spent that he no longer even feared prison. Miss Burdock sat with her huge form

... a slight burning sensation in h
herself up, looked at her feet enca
white stockings, and laughed feebly

"Take them off," she said, trying t
feet and failing. "Take them off.
me your ugly old stockings on? Th

Miss Burdock walked to the bed
gently back on the pillows.

"There, there, my lass. Leave
shut into the loft when it was burnin
—and Ishmael Dixon fetched you
brought you here. He's behaved
You're none the worse but for a bit
ankles. Your boots kept your feet s

Esther tried to scramble off the bed

"I must go home," she said. "I
Grey House."

The strange feeling of fear for wh
she looked closely into herself that ha
within the past forty-eight hours, c

understanding—she could only feel an absolute bewilderment.

"I've sent to The Grey House to tell them you're stopping," said Miss Burdock in the strong common-sense voice which had always dominated Esther as a child.

"What else did you say?" asked Esther.

"Nothing," said Miss Burdock, with a certain contempt. "You can tell 'em what tale you like—the fools that follow you—but I wasn't going to let my sister's child go out in the state you're in."

Esther pulled herself up by the post of the bed and walked a few steps across the floor. Save for the terrible shock she was practically uninjured.

"I'll stay to-night, as you have sent word," she said, "but I am all right."

"You *weren't* all right," said Miss Burdock, going composedly towards the door. "You were a couple of hours unconscious at least. How do your silly theories fit in with that? Why, you might have been burnt to death. What would the Hearers have said then?"

Esther drew herself up very straight, the strangest little figure in her aunt's white stockings, and her own petticoat and opened dress bodice, with her wild dark hair about her face. But the spirit of Jane Burdock—which could teach an uneducated woman to dominate the chapel-members and her little circle of dependents—shone very clear indeed in her niece's sunken eyes. There was immense mental power triumphing over bodily weakness in Esther at that moment when she was almost beaten. It

was a gallant last stand she made, with her knees shaking under her and the walls going round.

"You think I might have been burnt to death?" she cried. "Then I tell you I could not be. It was neither Ishmael nor any other living agency that really mattered—I should never have perished."

"That's madness," answered Miss Burdock.

"Only such as those men knew who walked through the burning fiery furnace," Esther flung back with an effort.

"But for your poor mother," said Miss Burdock grimly, "I wish Ishmael had left you to find out about that. Aren't you going to thank him?"

"I owe him no thanks," said Esther, almost as grimly. But she felt an instinctive determination, which she had not time to reason out, to say nothing about Dixon's attempt upon her life. She saw now, well enough, how it was—the words he had spoken to her long ago in the granary at home came back to her. He was trying to punish her in the most crude and obvious way he could think of for having, as he imagined, bewitched his son. And it could do her cause only harm, she vaguely felt, for such an episode to become known to the world at large. He was evidently going to hold his tongue for his own sake, and she would do the same.

So her swift wits worked in the bleak silence of the square bed-chamber, until her aunt came up with some tea.

"There, that'll do you more good than anything," said Miss Burdock, placing a tray on the dressing-table. "You can have my bed to yourself. I'd as soon sleep on the

sofa downstairs as not. But don't you let me hear you liken yourself to Scripture characters any more in my house."

Esther drank some of the tea eagerly, then drew all the resources of her body and mind together.

"Aunt, won't you believe me, once and for all, that I *do* hear the Voices? That I *have* been inspired from the Source of Life?"

Miss Burdock stood with a heavy hand on that slight shoulder—strong, calm, dominant.

"Maybe," she said very slowly, "maybe you *think* you hear them. I'm beginning to believe that. If you hadn't faith in yourself, now—however you started—I don't think folks would go on having such faith in you. But there was your great-aunt Lydia; she believed to her dying day she had a squirrel inside of her that was fond of nuts, and she was as sane every way else as you and me. Saner. A splendid housekeeper and the best of daughters, but a bit high-strung like you are. It's in the family. There was another old chap always swore he could hear what the crows said on a summer night, and he was the best hand at a bargain north of the Humber. But he'd fight all comers when he was a bit 'on,' if they said he didn't understand crow-talk."

"I didn't know that," said Esther slowly.

"No," answered Miss Burdock, "we never told you because you were high-strung, you see, and we thought it wouldn't do. But you'll take no harm now. It isn't madness or anything of that sort, you know. It's just a way of letting fancies get real. That's a lot commoner

than you'd think among those that live quiet lives in quiet places. Why, one day when you and Charlie were little, I happened to be over the hedge while you were in the wood talking about the trees, and making out they were wood-people, and I shook in my shoes. I remembered about the old chap who heard the crows talk and I shook where I stood."

She lifted the tray and prepared to go down.

"Well, good night, Esther. We shan't think any more alike to-morrow morning than we do now, and I'm dead against the Hearers; but I'm glad you're here safe to-night. It's given me a nasty turn, thinking what might have been. I can't bear to hear those old pigeons; they're flapping round the place yet every now and then, they're so unsettled."

"Good night, Aunt Burdock," said Esther, feeling that another moment would see the end of her endurance.

Then the door closed, the steps died away, and she could lie on the great hard bed in the calm of absolute exhaustion.

The next morning she appeared to be still sleeping when Miss Burdock came into the room, and the maids were sent warily about their business, so that Esther could have her sleep out. The weather had broken in the night, and the rain fell in a constant heavy stream down the window-panes. Once Esther opened her eyes and looked at them, then slipped away into the half-conscious state in which she had lain since Miss Burdock left her the night before. The house was so silent, with the maids sent out to the dairy and the men abroad with the carts, that Esther

rested in the midst of the streaming crystal downpour like a tired enchantress in an enchanted chamber, neither thinking, nor speaking, nor moving. Her heart beat lightly and intermittently, recovering slowly by natural means from the terrible shock she had undergone the day before, which had only followed on a long period of strain and over-fatigue. Best of all the Voices were quiet. They let her rest at last.

Miss Burdock spoke to her once or twice, but the words seemed to come from so far off that it was not worth while to answer them; they didn't seem to mean anything, either, they were just like the buzzing of flies on a summer's day.

But Miss Burdock did not understand this point of view, and after sending away Mary Astley from the door, and taking up fresh tea and toast three times, she sent a man on horseback to fetch the doctor at once.

"I don't think," said that gentleman when he arrived, "that I am justified in attending Miss Moor without her consent."

"Oh, I don't care about that," said Miss Burdock with some abruptness. "You can attend her or not, as you like. But you're coming upstairs first to see if she isn't dying on my hands."

So she drove the dapper little gentleman into the square bedroom as if he had been one of her own sheep. "I may say my niece had a nasty shock yesterday," she concluded. "Nearly got burnt to death in a wooden shed of mine; door got jammed somehow, with her inside and the sticks and straw on fire below. I ought to have pulled it down long ago."

The doctor's professional dignity was not proof against Miss Burdock and his own kind feeling; so he listened to Esther's heart, and asked questions which she did not answer (because he was in a mist too, and did not matter in the least).

"Well?" said Miss Burdock when they got outside.

The doctor went neatly downstairs, fastening his left glove.

"My dear Miss Burdock," he said, "it's simply shock following on a prolonged mental strain. Don't try to make her take my medicines, because she won't, and she doesn't want them; but defend that door for a week with your own life, and she will be perfectly recovered. Otherwise I won't answer for the consequences."

He paused, and put out a delicate hand, which almost disappeared in Miss Burdock's grasp. "I suppose you won't be able to keep that lot out?" he added, nodding in the direction of The Grey House.

"I think I can," said Miss Burdock, unconsciously gripping the doctor's fingers until he winced with pain.

"Well, if any one can," he said, tenderly drawing the right glove on to the bruised member. "Good food—perfect quiet—no excitement. Not even her mother to see her—you understand?"

"Um! Look here, doctor, don't you mention a word about this to any one," said Miss Burdock. "Favour to me. Don't mention it to a living soul."

"Certainly not. Good day," and the doctor entered his neat cart and drove away with alacrity. He had a taste for a neat toilette and a pretty woman inside of it,

and he was really rather frightened of Miss Burdock in her queer hat and loose garments.

She stood for some time biting a straw in deepest meditation, and looking after him down the empty road. She was going to obey his orders if she had to meet all the Hearers in personal conflict from Stallard downwards, but she was too clever to waste force. How could it be done in the best and easiest fashion ?

What explanation would satisfy the Hearers and Esther alike, and yet give her a clear week in which to obey the doctor's advice ?

The remembrance of Esther's assumption of miraculous powers such as belonged to holy men of old, came back to her as she turned into the gate again and saw the refuse from the fire. The Messenger must be made to appear in character, otherwise there'll be no holding her——

What *did* saints and prophets do when they wanted to keep quiet ?

Caves, deserts, cells ?

Why, solitary meditation !

That was it. The Messenger had retired for a week for absolute silence and meditation.

With a feeling that now she'd got it, she spat out the straw and tramped up to Esther's room with a jug of new milk, and a feeding-cup she used for cade lambs in the house sometimes, in the lambing season.

Towards evening Esther roused herself by an immense effort, to ask if any one had been from The Grey House. She did not really want to speak to, or see, or hear of any one—not even of Stallard.

"Yes, Miss Astley's been. And Stallard's not expected over again till Saturday, she tells me. I've told 'em——"

Miss Burdock paused and cleared her throat—how would Esther take it?

"I've told 'em you've come here for a week of solitary meditation. All the—the saints and hermits did it. It's the proper thing. I said you were retiring for a week of—of prayer and meditation."

Miss Burdock gulped over the word "prayer," but went through with it.

"I told 'em you wouldn't communicate with me excepting when absolutely necessary. You can make your mind easy. They'll think you're more of a holy one than ever."

Esther looked at her with that calm lack of surprise at extraordinary things which entire prostration will produce.

"What are you doing it for?" she said faintly. "You hate the Message. You wouldn't speak to me on the road. Why are you doing it?"

"I'm not doing it for you at all. I'm doing it for your mother," said Miss Burdock. "She's nobody to help her but me. Your father's no use, or he'd ha' whipped this out of you long ago."

"And Mary—Paul—they all understand—I'm meditating—praying?" Esther whispered, seizing like a drowning woman on the straw held out to her.

"A week of silent prayer and meditation," repeated Miss Burdock. "Go to sleep."

So Esther went to sleep, and Miss Burdock retired to the best sitting-room, where she only sat when she was very miserable.

"I've made up an excuse, and I'm going to stick to it. A blasphemous excuse," she groaned sincerely. But something else shot up uncontrollably within her. "It's a rare good 'un, I must say," she added, "a rare good 'un."

Meantime the little adventuress lay on the big bed upstairs fairly winded by her fight with the world. And the odds for the future were against her. Every hour, as the quiet hours slipped over her mind, healing it, she came nearer to finding out irrevocably that it was after all but a gigantic lie she had created. The lie she had first conceived just grown up a greater lie—not a shining truth as she had for a time fervently believed.

CHAPTER XX

MARY ASTLEY and the Hearers who had appointments or classes arranged for the coming week received the information concerning Esther's unpremeditated departure as another sign of direct inspiration. Ordinary people—even holy people—made plans for such times of retreat beforehand. The Messenger had, of course, retired into solitude and prayer at the call of some divine moment.

So there were very charming paragraphs on the subject in the "Lowport News," and the London papers copied. Miss Burdock was enraged beyond words at the description of her "Northern Homestead," which appeared in an illustrated journal, with a snapshot of herself bending over the pig bucket. She had to dig a whole row of potatoes before she could trust herself to take up Esther's breakfast on the day the paper arrived, marked with a red cross by Mrs. Pobson. But she had set herself the task of keeping the outside world out of that bedroom, and she'd do it—if they published a portrait of her having her bath.

The blinds were down when she went in, but the cool air blew pleasantly through open windows. There were no flowers, because Miss Burdock did not hold with flowers indoors; but the bare clean room with nothing to suggest

or distract was the best place Esther could have been in, and she raised herself on her pillows, feeling for the first time since coming there that things mattered—that there was something she wanted in the world beyond those four dim walls and perfect rest. The fighter was getting her wind again.

"Well, Esther," said Miss Burdock, "so you're beginning to take notice again. There's a box of clothes Mary Astley sent for you in the corner; I'll get out what you want, if you feel you could sit up a bit later on."

Esther pushed her heavy hair back from her forehead.

"I forget what day it is," she said. "When do I go back to The Grey House?"

"Day after to-morrow," answered Miss Burdock. "First three days you laid like a log. Here, get your breakfast. I'm not going to talk to you. I won't tell more lies than I can help, and I said I should hold no conversation when I interviewed those——"

But she refrained from further designating such of the Hearers as had called at the farm.

So Esther lay back again in the cool silence after her aunt had gone, and began to think of Stallard. He was the first to emerge from the dimness into which everything had for a time receded. What did he think? Was he satisfied? Would he very much wonder at her? Perhaps he would be angry.

A tear of sheer weakness rolled down her cheek at the thought of his anger. She wished he were there—Paul—she wanted him so. Then she turned and hid her face in the pillow.

But her lethargy had departed for good with her crying, and after a short pleasant sleep she awoke again feeling lighter, freer from nervous strain, than she had done since she first heard the Voices. She had not heard them for five nights—never since the shock of the fire—and she realized now how terrible the strain of always listening for them in every other sound had been.

Why—every time the blind blew against the pane her senses had sharpened—in every sudden silence she had expected to hear the monotonous cadence of those chanted phrases——

Her thoughts wandered back to Stallard. If only they could be married at once, so that he could take care of her —she wanted so to be taken care of—she was so tired of fighting——

But Lavington. He rose like a wall between her and her desire.

Then, in her weakness, her thoughts travelled idly back to the time when she was secretary to Lavington. Scraps of talk rose up in her mind. How interested he had been in out-of-the-way creeds and religions. A subject that had always interested her too, even when she was a clerk in London. She'd gone to meeting-houses of strange sects —her mind retained a jumble of mixed impressions still. Why—it was a book showed her by Lavington, of course, which first stirred the sleeping inspiration which produced the Message. That fact constituted the hold which Lavington held over her and Stallard.

How could she even for a moment have forgotten a great fact like that ?

She fell asleep again, and gave up thinking until another day.

But the next morning the world began to press so closely round the sides of the great quiet bed that she could no longer go to sleep and forget it. Her exhausted energies were once more ready for the fray, and she only waited until Miss Burdock had gone down to try how it felt to sit again in the arm-chair by the window.

The air blew a little chill that morning, as it does near Shelton even in July, and she shivered as she walked across the room in her thin dressing-gown. There would be a shawl in her box most likely.

She opened the lid, and surely enough a white fleecy shawl lay on the top, which she wrapped round her shoulders with a great feeling of comfort. It was queer how pleasantly light and calm she felt, more open to physical sensation than she had been for a long time. Her mind and body had taken their evenly balanced places.

She glanced down as she shut the lid and saw a book lying wrapped in paper. Well, she wanted something to read. She would open it, sitting there by the window——

So she settled herself in the big chair with the warm shawl about her, and a light cool air on her face; infinitely refreshed, she opened the parcel.

Then the paper fell to the ground, and she saw with a sick feeling of repulsion a magnificently bound copy of "The Message." She suddenly hated the sight of the tooled vellum outside and the meaningless phrases within, in a way that only those can realize who have come back to

something they were greatly troubled with, during the stress of nervous exhaustion. The very placing of the words brought back the sensation of mingled strain and exaltation and unnatural excitement under which she had laboured since the beginning of the year. Her mind revolted at them as an over-fed stomach at the sight of food.

She stared down at it, knowing that a terrible thing had happened, but not knowing why.

She hated "The Message."

In the light of a restored critical sense the very first words of it drove home to her an absolute conviction that they were not inspired. They were, as her whole theory had been from the beginning, but a jumble of old thoughts so badly digested in her diseased mind that they did not fuse. They remained unintelligible even to herself. How had the Hearers come to believe them mystical?

The room seemed to recede from her until she sat alone in the midst of a great space. The shock which she had been suffering from all these days, then, was not caused by the fire—it was caused by a knowledge sprung at her in those moments when she faced eternity, and which had only receded a little until she was able to bear it and live.

She was not the inspired Messenger whom she had come to believe in more ardently, to worship more fervently than any one in the world. She was Esther Moor, the impostor, the little woman dragging from the world what it refused to give her. Could she now continue to play a part where she had been the real person even in the deepest recesses of her own consciousness?

Once she had played easily enough. A true adventuress —the plain blunt Burdock in her driving her on. It had been easy.

But now——

She read the inflated words and her head dropped on her hands. She could no more create phrases like that, or talk as she had done, than a delirious person can repeat his ravings on recovery.

She looked up after a long time and defied the world again through the open window. She would go on. The thing was to find out how to do it.

So during the remaining hours of her stay with Miss Burdock she thought the matter out with the old simplicity and directness which had been in abeyance while she was dominated by hysterical hallucinations. The whole force of her intelligence was now focussed on one point alone. How to preserve from hurt that fierce egotism which had become so inflated that she had seen herself for a time with the proportions of a Divine Revealer. She would not shrink back to a mere ordinary woman who got left out of things —she'd die, body and soul—before she'd come to that.

She was as ready now to fight the universe as ever—more ready—because she had tasted the pleasures of victory.

But on the morning when she was to go back to The Grey House she turned to look with a poignant regret, felt rather than thought about, at the bare, restful room and the square bed. She had been terribly unhappy there, and yet at rest, as a prisoner when his trial is over. Now she experienced the vague, painful regret a prisoner

released might do, when he had to go out and fight the difficult world again.

Miss Burdock stood in the passage when she went downstairs, directing a farm hand to fetch the box.

"Well, Esther," she said. "So you're off home again. Here, George, the door on the left." Then, to Esther: "I've had to send the shepherd up. Ishmael Dixon's never done a day's work since the fire. It seems to have knocked him over altogether."

Ay, the difficult world was here, sure enough.

"Hasn't he been here since?" asked Esther, fastening her coat. "Haven't you seen him?"

"Oh, yes, I've seen him," answered Miss Burdock, "but he won't say a word about the fire. His wife says he can't bear to hear it mentioned. He's never been——" She paused, then looked direct at her niece. "Well, there's no use hiding it—he's never been the same since his son died. Not that he mightn't have died, anyway," she added quickly, noting Esther's face.

"Why, Aunt Burdock, you needn't trouble to explain that," said Esther, pulling herself resolutely together. "You don't suppose it was not having a doctor that did harm—it was rather the constant suggestion of needing one that spoiled poor Tom Dixon's chances. But we won't discuss that now."

"We'd better not," said Miss Burdock, rather red about the forehead. "Well, here's the trap."

Esther stepped out into the morning air, which felt wonderfully fresh and sweet after a week indoors, and the likeness of mind between herself and her aunt which

had always driven them apart, for once drew her nearer. She felt fired with a sudden admiration and understanding of that resolute self-control.

"Aunt Burdock, you've hated having me and yet you've taken me in and done your very best," she said. "Don't think I'm not grateful, for I am—from the bottom of my heart. Only for the life of me I can't see why you've thought me worth it."

"I haven't," said Miss Burdock grimly. "But I told you before I did it on account of your mother. Mothers are such—fools—and they make other people like 'em."

"If they do," said Esther, looking down from the trap at the great gaunt figure of nobody's mother with a feeling she herself did not recognize, "if they do—they're the divine teachers."

"Has the Message only just taught you that?" asked Miss Burdock. Then, as the cart started on: "You needn't come again, you know. This is over and done with, and I don't want you. You understand?"

"But—Aunt Burdock——" began Esther.

"Never," said Miss Burdock, raising a great hand, "never you darken these doors while you carry that blasphemous Message. I've done it once for your mother's sake, but I'll not do it twice if I see you dying in my road. I've got to think sometime of my own soul and my God."

"Oh, hush," cried Esther. "Drive on at once, shepherd."

"No, he won't," said Miss Burdock, seizing the pony's head, "he'll stop and listen. I see now, how you may try to make out from all this that I don't condemn the Message,

though I don't uphold it. But I do condemn it. I condemn every one of the quack religions that sap the goodness out of the true faith in Christ Jesus. You take all the majesty and sacredness and awfulness out of religion when you begin to chop and change it like you do your pills for those that advertise the most. There's your book—your fine Message that you sell for twenty times more than it's worth—you've got a patent for that, I hear, same as the pills do. My word, Esther, your father did worse for you when he brought you up free to choose your own form of worship than when he turned his back on life and took up china mending. There, that's off my chest." She suddenly released the pony's head and slapped its plump sides.

"Now drive on."

The shepherd sat red and stolid, but inwardly feeling that his mistress was up to any of them, and Esther's face was absolutely rigid. She didn't care—she didn't care—she was going to go on. No power on earth should defeat her now she had fought so far. If anything had been required to harden her resolution Miss Burdock's words would have done it.

When she reached her own sitting-room in The Grey House, and sat listening to Mary's half-awed inquiries, and smelt the scent of a bunch of heliotrope which Stallard had sent with his love that morning, she felt as if she had been on a long journey, where such strange things had happened that it was odd to come back and find places and people just the same.

"There are some of the Hearers coming over from

Lowport this afternoon," said Mary after a while, in a tentative way. "I didn't know whether to put them off, and so—well, you can always refuse to see them. They will understand that your period of reflection is not yet over. I was wondering——" She paused. "Esther, I must ask—I was wondering if you had any new Message to give us."

Esther stared at her own thin hands folded on her knee. Now was the test time. She must frame an answer now that would travel over half the world.

"Look here, Mary."

At last she spoke with the old directness which Mary recognized almost with a sense of shock. It reminded her so clearly that the inspired Messenger was, after all, the girl who once wore shabby dresses and was clever always, but of no account.

"Look here, Mary," said Esther, "I've had a wonderful experience. For a week I've lain more or less in a sort of trance; not unconscious, but in a state of deep mental absorption. That period marked the end of the Message. It is now delivered. I have nothing to add to it or to take from it—my part for the future is to make the world hear it. I was simply the inspired agent. Do you understand?"

Mary went white with emotion and her eyes were luminous.

"How sacred! How wonderful! Why, this must convince even those who doubted the truth before. It has the very ring of absolute sincerity. If you were not inspired you could go on and on——" She broke off abruptly:

Good Mary.

Esther got up and threw open t
cool air fly upon her for a moment

"Thankful?" she said then. '
should have died. It was more tha

The memory of all the torture al
sighing of the wind and the hush
waking up of dawn, came upon her.
she looked across the familiar garde
paid too dearly, even for the conqu
was some time before she turned ba
stood still in the middle of the room,

"Mary," she said, going up to th
hand on her arm, "can't you under
sacred tidings could be too heavy
for the woman who carried them. T
blood might bend under the stra
that?"

Mary took the brown hand that
reverently kissed it.

"How

"they'll have come by the one-thirty train. Shall you speak to them in the long room as usual, or are you too tired to tell them what you have told me ?"

Esther got up and shook out her purple stuff gown, her eyes shone, yellow and indomitable, beneath her black hair. She wore just the look she had done in the granary years ago, as a little girl.

"I'm not too tired," she said. "I shall never be too tired."

"What wonderful power there is in your faith," said Mary, following her.

Esther paused a moment and looked round. The Burdock in her would shine out, now that the mists of hysteria had cleared away and left it uncovered.

"In my faith ?" she said. "There's a wonderful power in *any* faith. If it is righteous—well, so much the better. But some day the world will realize that faith is the raw material—the motive force—by which miracles absolutely past our present understanding can be accom plished."

"Ah, how we must thank God, then, for the right faith,' breathed Mary.

Esther paused with her hand on the door of the great room where her Hearers were assembled. A shadow of fear swept over her face, but it was only a shadow, then she passed inside amid the reverent greetings of those who took her for the Messenger of God.

CHAPTE

STALLARD walked with l
it was a Sunday afternc
they met the maid from Miss
the road waiting up and down
herd. She was a pretty girl with
childish face, that the leaves ma
over, and Stallard stared at her

"Somebody's going to have
laughing.

"Oh, it's the shepherd from
Esther, giving the girl a kind '
sympathy. She used to despise
lanes waiting for thier lovers,
remembered watching a house
under an elm tree on a dull au
dripping off the dying leaves, a
as incomprehe

They passed round some undergrowth to be out of the girl's sight as he said that, and Esther stood still in the humming fragrance that is sweeter for love-making than any other atmosphere on earth.

"Well"—she noted once more Stallard's gay, handsome face, and the air he always wore of easy conquest of everything worth having—"Well, I suppose we're all like that."

"Like what?" he said, pulling a nut bough through his fingers.

Esther came nearer and put her hand on his, flushing the odd red of dark people who seldom blush.

"Like that little girl," she whispered. "Paul, do you know you haven't kissed me since you came to-day?"

He frowned and kissed her hurriedly.

"Oh, there was somebody there when I arrived—and—Esther, you seem above that sort of thing. I'm not demonstrative by nature, and I think—I hope—that I see love from its spiritual side, with the animal part that there must be in human love not always visible. If it were not so, I should not dare to love you, Esther. Only so, can it be fitting that the Messenger should love and be loved—you have taught me that, dearest. You have removed me to a nobler plane than that upon which I ever stood before."

"Have I?" said Esther. Then she sighed a little and walked on. She'd got to live up to this ideal of hers, but for the moment she wanted something quite different.

"Shall you still feel like that when we are married?" she said.

things it *did* explain, as perhaı
absence, for instance, of tho
little maidservant further dowı
less receiving from the shepher
after a time, " Paul, do you kn
like you to forget I am the Me
to forget everything but that I
woman and your promised wife.
that I'm no Messenger at all ; I
girl who loves you."

" You mustn't say such things
ness for me," Stallard said. "
ideal of you. So long as you are
world you must be the same to n
lower than a place beside your
highly you prize your position : y
a less value on it ? "

Esther looked up and down th
her eye where she and Charlie
crushing insignificance of th

fluency. "Now, the damp's falling. I must take care of you now as I am going to do always—we'll go home before the dew soaks through your shoes."

A sudden, uncontrollable thought seized hold of Esther's imagination—the thought of a dark, wild night, not fit for a girl to be out in, yet—Stallard with Nellie on the Shelton cliffs. But it went again as swiftly. Of course, there was nothing in that—he never had kissed Nellie on the cliffs in the darkness.

When they were once more in the sitting-room facing the garden, she began to feel very happy and reassured, and the vague uneasiness which had lurked in the back of her mind about her lover vanished now that she knew the reason for his seeming coldness. It was just his reverence for her that made him afraid to let himself go. That was the one faint barrier that rose between them.

She began to long intensely that he should know her as she really was—just an ordinary woman—just, as he had said, a little girl waiting to be kissed.

She looked searchingly into his face through the twilight, but only his eyes and hair and the dim outline of his features could be seen.

How would he take it if he really knew ?

The bliss in the thought of sharing the burden with him, that she had only now come to realize the weight of, was unspeakable. She had found out now how her spirit ached with bearing it, as we find out in the end the cause of an infinite physical weariness.

"Paul," she said, "if I were really just an ordinary girl,

"My dear girl, haven't I tol
he said.

"It's a thing I can't be told
in a low tone, "because—bec
when I was an ordinary little g
care for me until I was on the r

Something drove her to brin
what had only lurked in dimme
her consciousness—everybody k
with utter unexpectedness.

Stallard turned round quickly
no inclination to yawn now.

"Esther," he said, "is that ge
perfectly well that I'd rather li
than the hampered one of a rev
the position a man would choose-
—not, at least, a man such as
you'd remember that. You thi
the steps of even a wife's grea
Let me live

"What truth?" she said. "What truth?"

He paused for a moment.

"Any truth," he answered. "The glorious tearing down of sham and falsehood. If by my life's effort I'd succeeded in moving one great lie to leave the truth bare beneath, I should be satisfied."

"But, but—the person," faltered Esther. "There'd be somebody, you know, who lived by that lie. What of them?"

Stallard stood erect and fearless as he did at a public meeting—in fact he had forgotten for the moment that he was not at a public meeting, answering the question of some earnest seeker after Truth.

"I think," he said, "there'd be something god-like in helping and succouring those who'd lied long, and given up lying of their own free will. To acknowledge a lie without coercion—that's the final test of moral strength. I could give my all to help a man who did that, but I should give it with my hat off." Then he remembered Esther again. "So you see I'm not marrying you because of your great place in the world," he added. "I'd rather be without it. It's you, dear, that I want."

She crept into his arms at this, but did not speak, so he thought her still suspicious of his motives.

"I'd rather," he whispered, "though it seems a most wicked thing to say—have you without your high mission, dearest. You'd seem nearer, more my own——"

She pulled herself away and stood alone again, very erect, filling the quiet room, somehow, with the thrill of indomitable purpose.

gravely.

"My love—that's been the
the world began—I dedicate
bear it." He paused. "So lo
me a fortune-hunter."

Esther started—that though
curred to her.

"Paul, I've never connecte
ignoble," she said simply. "D
like throwing dirt on my image

"Then what on earth *did* y
Stallard wearily.

"I was only thinking of the
answered. "Once I was nobod
me—you too. Then when everyl
you did too. And a sort of dou
have noticed me if they hadn'
somehow, and came out to-nigl
But I see now, dearest. I believ
had me as I

could only prove my love—if you could only be the simple, little dark girl again. But I've brought you the only sacrifice I can—the sacrifice of my life's work. I can't give you a greater proof than that. You do believe me now, dearest?"

The swift words, not at all wonderful or even plausible in themselves, went home on the tones of that wonderful voice to the very depths of Esther's consciousness. She felt, more intimately than she had thought it possible to feel anything, that she had defrauded some vague intangible deity of Truth. She'd stolen a sacrifice and laid it on the altar of a lie. But she clenched her thin fists against Stallard's breast and set her teeth. Well, if she had! She could get nothing without stealing—the world would *give* her nothing.

"Darling, you doubt me yet?" said Stallard, more anxious than she had ever heard him.

Then she made her confession of faith, so real, so absolute, that it seemed, like the vow of a girl at confirmation, to reach into eternity.

"I should believe in you, Paul, if mother went back on me."

He started and laughed a little, it seemed such an anticlimax.

"Well, that's a mild oath to swear by," he said.

"You wouldn't think so if you knew what mother was," said Esther, but quite suddenly it came to her that, until that moment, she hadn't known herself.

"Oh, well, I'm satisfied," he said. And indeed he heaved a great sigh of relief, as if something inevitable and unpleasant were over and done with. He fingered

waking slightly as a seemingly
throb. He treated her different
They were not so near to each
who loved as they did. She felt
her with the same fire that she lo
kept them apart. Something int

That must be, of course, the
sanctity between them. That mu
as she loved him. Ah! if it coul
a moment.

But the thought went no furth
Mary's fervent, reverent gaze fixed

She could not give up such hom
be sure of Paul's love—she couldn
could cling together then as Adam
were turned out of the garden shor

She must live and die in the terri
her known to a countless multitud

"Well, good night, Paul," she
gether in the hall after supper. "V

he said very pleasantly. "You want somebody to look after you, dear; after all, a woman's no idea of sparing herself in the right place."

"Of course I want you," Esther answered.

She thought very hardly of Lavington as she went upstairs to her room again. He seemed to have taken a very mean advantage of a chance piece of information, and she wondered how, being the man he was, he could do it. Then the recollection of her last interview with him, when she had been borne up by the conviction of her direct inspiration, made her feel what a fool she must have looked to him. He *knew*—and yet she had talked to him of a delusion as if it had been a Message from God.

Next day Nellie came over about four o'clock, and the long walk through the woods and quiet country seemed to have deepened that repose in her fair face and clear eyes which had always offered such an extreme contrast to Esther's restless intensity of expression. They did not look in the least like sisters as they sat under the trees and talked about Mrs. Moor, and their father's china mending, and how Ned had got a rise at the office and come to live at home again.

"Stephen Astley seems to be pushing him on," said Esther with a smile, more interested than usual in other people because she could not look into herself any more for fear of what she should see there. She knew of so much—it was like looking over an abyss even to glance—so she would keep her gaze fixed outside.

"Stephen's very good," said Nellie, responding more

husband—what more do you

"I want to—to care, Esther

say I shall never marry at all.

and some girls haven't any tast

"Not girls like you," said

looked at the ground, somethin

"You used to seem just the so

well, it was about the time Pa

it?"

She looked up suddenly—was

desire to surprise something?—a

painfully flushed that tears stood

"Why, Nellie, what's the matt

"I don't know, I'm sure," an

away. "I suppose I was struc

everything since then. We seem

real you—the one we'd always ha

did, I know, for you to be the

when I go upstairs I often wish t

back again—all of us—to

do, I think. You've captured a fascinating young man, Esther," and she got up from her chair with a nervous laugh.

"Some people"— Esther picked up her handkerchief from the ground and tried to laugh too—"some people thought, I believe, that *you* were the one."

"How silly! But that's always the way with sisters," said Nellie, fastening her coat. "Well, I suppose it's time I was going."

"I'll come with you to the gate," said Esther.

So the two sisters walked down the drive together, talking of home things again, and bits of familiar news.

"Mr. Lavington's very bad, I hear," said Nellie, with her hand on the gate. "Just his old complaint, but worse. They seem to think he won't——" Then she broke off. "Oh, of course, you don't believe in being ill."

"Never mind that," said Esther impatiently. "I don't try to influence your beliefs. Has mother been to see him?"

"No, appears he wants to be left alone, but he always was like that." They both looked up the road. "Mrs. Pobson's been over once when father was in Lowport—mother does like having her, and so do I. She's so good all through, if you know what I mean. Seems young Mrs. Will is expecting in the spring—they're delighted. I'd really have married Will for his mother's sake if I could—but I forget—you stole him from me. Don't you remember his proposing to you, Esther?"

They both laughed a little, then Nellie suddenly put out her hand and gripped her sister's sleeve.

again. What is the reason ?
Aunt Burdock, but I can't
there. You weren't so badly
home."

"I wanted to be alone for
Esther, and Nellie retreated w
invisible distance, leaving he
solitude of greatness. She ben
brown face with an odd feeling

"Well, good-bye."

As Esther felt the soft touch
cheek all the stored-up longing
had been dammed up within he
Wall Opening burst forth at las

"Stop, Nellie. I heard some
course I didn't believe—but I
what nonsense people talk.
Opening—some people behind
She drew a long breath and gaze
face. "They said

"Oh, I know," said Esther, feeling horribly humiliated and yet determined to go on, "but I thought you'd like to hear. It's such a joke, isn't it?"

"Isn't it?" laughed Nellie again. Then the sisters parted.

CHAPTE

ESTHER went back into
again with a great sens
Astley coming across the lawn
had done before what an imm
Mary—that was why she had
course, without really understs
back and closed her eyes, obliv
pricking, stinging hurt at the l
Nellie's attitude.

It was quite impossible to t
never been anything at all betwe
the admiration for a pretty g
showed on first meeting her.
jealousies crowded back again, an
them on the wings of her immen
done when she had believed in h

With a pang of terrible bitterness, which made all other pains nothing—all other considerations nothing—like the pangs of a woman in travail, she realized at last that she'd had to *get* Stallard. Even her lover had not come to her. She'd had to *get* him by reaching a place above ordinary women.

If she and Nellie had stood side by side, just they two on a great desert with nothing to guide him in his choice—which would he have chosen ?

She kept her eyes fast closed, glad of Mary's silent presence in her place of agony. A few drops of moisture started to her forehead as the relentless inner voice went on : " Which would he have chosen ? "

And the newly awakened Burdock in her, no longer lulled to a morbid unconsciousness by hysterical delusions, called out through every fibre of her being.

" Nellie ! "

It was not Esther, the woman, that Paul had fallen in love with, but Esther, the Messenger : she knew that once and for all, though she thought he had loved her afterwards for herself. But no words of her lover's could ever touch that knowledge that he had loved the Messenger first, because it was fixed fast in the bed-rock of her nature. It was part of her, as the fierce knowledge of her necessity to fight for everything had always been—Everything ?

Like a clear shaft of light across her hour of darkness a thought flashed out.

One thing had come free, her mother's faith in her !

But through the next day her mind ached almost to numbness with the after pain of that hour. Even the

sudden shock and horror of finding herself a conscious impostor instead of an inspired revealer grew less and less vivid as time went by under the stress of this new preoccupation.

And strangely enough the sense of her own wrongdoing did not trouble her at all after the very first. She'd so taken hold from her earliest youth, with the Burdock tenacity, of the idea that a creed was merely a point of view, that she laboured under no greater sense of sin than she would have done if she had palmed off upon the world a new theory concerning the rotation of the sun. She'd taught nothing wrong—only high and noble things that people were the better for—she felt she'd got what she wanted from the world by a robbery that was almost noble because she was only capable of noble adventures—no sly stabbing in the back—or robbing the poor and helpless; she'd done it on a magnificent scale.

"I wonder," said Mary's gentle voice, "how Ishmael Dixon is? He's not been to work since the fire, I'm told; but he has never seemed the same man since his son——"

She broke off and coloured vividly.

"What do you mean?" cried Esther, glad to lash out at some one. "Do you think, too, that the Message is to blame for Tom Dixon's death?"

"Oh, Esther, forgive me. Of course I don't," faltered Mary. "I—I don't know why I said that—no wonder you are angry."

"I am not angry," said Esther, rising, "only surprised."

Then she went into the house, and Mary followed, shedding a few tears, but not doubting at all. She could not

have doubted Esther's direct inspiration if the Messenger had stood on her head in Lowport Market Place.

"Esther," she said when they got in, "I was going to tell you I've got a letter from Charlie. He is coming home in time for your wedding and—and he wants—he wants to take me back with him."

"What?" cried Esther, turning sharp round.

"I didn't think you'd be so very surprised," said Mary, a watery smile creeping round her mouth. "You see, I didn't get very ill until just before he went away—and we were always friends—he took such care of me. Oh, Esther, I think it'll be lovely to have him to take care of me all the time. You don't know——"

"Don't I?" said Esther, but quite without smiling. Then, after a pause. "I'm very glad."

"I couldn't bear it if you weren't," said Mary, openly sobbing at last. "After all I owe to you—everything in the world. I simply couldn't bear it if you weren't pleased."

Esther put her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"You know it isn't my way to say much, Mary, but I'm very, very glad you are going to be my sister. Didn't Charlie send any message for me?"

"Yes. No. At least he did say something, but I don't think you'll care——"

"Go on, Mary."

"Well, he said he had no wish to interfere with my being a Hearer, though it was only—I *said* you wouldn't like it—only one of your fancies grown more real than the rest," Mary concluded in a shocked voice. "He went on

about your fancying the trees talked—you and he together. He's awfully fond of you, Esther."

Esther felt angrily that she didn't need Mary's apologies to tell her that; but controlled her tongue and went up alone to her sitting-room.

After all, what did anything matter so long as she was not sure whether Paul loved her—*herself—Esther*—or the inspired revealer that enshrouded her.

She grew very thin as time went on; burnt up, the little flaming soul, with a love that demanded nothing less than the certainty of everything in return.

The Healers came in greater numbers and with stronger enthusiasm than ever, and she spoke to them out of a vague indifference, which impressed them as much as her former vivid eloquence. It needs only a touch to keep such a ball rolling when it is so well weighted as that of the Hearers. The whole thing had been magnificently organized by Stallard and Esther together, who brought a union of qualities to bear that worked marvels in the way of administration. Even people outside, who did not believe, looked on and said: "How wonderful—how difficult!"

Esther asked Paul no more questions about Nellie, because she felt it could do no good, but the unspoken ones slipped in and out between all her talk with him. He was more demonstrative than he had been before the Sea-Wall Opening, but she had lost the feeling of security, and was always unconsciously seeking grounds for her suspicion that it was not her—the *woman*—he cared for, but the inspired revealer.

One night after he had gone, she went up into her room

and leaned out of the window. It was just such a night, dark and with a rising wind, on which she would a little while ago have heard the Voices. But now she had absolutely forgotten them. All she did was to stare out into the dark as if it were the pool of ink into which a mystic gazes, trying to see in the deeps an answer to a question.

Oh! she felt she'd give the world to really know—and there was no way of finding out!

She'd fought; and the lust of conquest was upon her still; she'd *got* everything—or hadn't she? Was there just the greatest thing of all that she could never prove herself to possess?

They would be married, happy, rich, famous.

But she'd *never know.*

Even now, if she were shorn of everything but just herself, and made like Nellie,—what would he do?

Even now, if she were no longer the Messenger, but just Esther Moor, and he had to choose between her and Nellie, which would he choose?

The jealousy which had been in her from childhood, had crept like a deep-seated disease into every fibre of her being during these weeks, eating away her self-control; and tonight in the darkness she first saw some glimmering possibility of obtaining an answer to her ceaseless question.

The first sight of it was so terrible to her that she started back, as the mystic might from the magic pool, and dared not look any longer.

Then she advanced again.

"The voluntary acknowledgment of a successful lie is the last test of moral strength." Paul had said that. He'd

told how he could help and honour any one who had strength for that gigantic sacrifice on the altar of Truth. Greater than Abraham laying there his only son. The last test.

Where was she going ?

She pulled down the blind resolutely and went to bed, but her last thought was of this wonderful sacrifice she was *not* going to make.

But if she did—she'd know then for certain whether Paul loved the Messenger or Esther, because there would only be Esther left.

And he would be able to live the life he wished with only Esther ; no need for a great house and a large income, but just any little place—a tent, which, as he said, he could always move where his work wanted him most. He could join again the great free Brotherhood of Common Men, and she would not have stultified his career.

But all she had wanted so tremendously ? What of that ? Was she going to sink down into a little woman that nobody noticed after knowing the reverence and almost worship of thousands ? All she'd fought for—all she'd nearly died for—all she'd *got ?*

Never !

The next day a party of Hearers from a distant place were even more impressed than they expected to be by the blunt vigour and vividness of the Messenger. Her Message, she told them, was delivered, and the state of exaltation in which she had passed the period of its deliverance was lifted from her ; now her mission was to drive it home.

One person only, from the neighbourhood, was present at that meeting, and she said to the strangers when they got outside :

" You ever seen Jane Burdock ? No, of course you won't have. Well, I could ha' shut my eyes and thought it was her talking—only not such a loud voice."

" Who's Jane Burdock ? " asked the strangers.

" Miss Moor's aunt. Methodist preacher. She does knock the right nail on the head, I can tell you. There is a—a *drive* about a Burdock."

" Oh," said the strangers, and one of them put it down in a report book to send to an evening paper which had contained a portrait of Miss Burdock and her pig bucket.

Meantime Esther went out into the garden all aglow with the mingled pleasure and exhaustion that comes to every one who has successfully dominated an audience half inclined to criticize. Again she'd got something, torn it from unwilling minds.

The adventuress gloried in that, but the woman, Esther, was waiting doubtful still.

The Messenger had got all she desired—that was true—but there was something more of which the woman wanted to be certain ; the *woman* was not yet satisfied.

As Esther sat there under the trees she began to feel so fierce a jealousy of the Messenger she had created that it drove out her weaker jealousy of her sister. For though Paul might have cared for Nellie once, she felt very certain he loved the Messenger now ; she had only to dream over one of their many lovers' meetings to feel sure of that, because he had been such a perfect lover since the walk

in the wood. The only question was: Did he love *her*, the little brown Esther she herself knew and had fought for all her life? If not it was worth nothing.

She wanted him to love *her*, not the abstract personality with which she had clothed her commonplace self by the force of her own intelligence. And there is nothing so hard to combat as jealousy of an abstraction, because it gives to every blow that pushes it away and then closes in again, heavy, impalpable, unhurt. So Esther gave way, inch by inch, moment by moment, and began to know an ardent obsession worse to bear than that of the Voices —the terrible old obsession of jealousy which has moved women to every kind of strange deed throughout the ages; and it was no less potent for such deeds because it was jealousy of the phantom being she had created. Shadows are harder to kill than realities—having no life they cannot die, they can only disappear in the strong sunshine of common sense and right judgment, and those are qualities not likely to develop much in the character of the leader of a quack religion.

Esther had created a shadow—had endowed it with life —and now it was her enemy.

She saw the irony of it well enough as the pleasant days slipped by until the summer was nearly ended, and all she possessed did not matter because of the bitter ache that will spoil any success and any happy combination of circumstance.

One afternoon at the end of August a messenger came to The Grey House with a cab from Shelton, and a note to say that Mr. Lavington was much worse. Would Esther

go over to see him that afternoon, as he wanted to speak to her particularly, and it might very soon be too late? He had something to say to her.

And angry as she had been with Lavington, it was not in her nature to refuse such a request from a dying man; so she put on her hat and drove at once to the familiar house in Shelton main street. As she got out of the cab and went up the path a crowd of kindly memories went with her and a sudden thought drew them all together.

It was *her*, Lavington had liked, not the inspired Messenger. It was her—the little dark girl of no account—that he had thought so much of.

She went up to his room with a very tender feeling for her old friend.

"Why, it's Esther back," he said rather weakly. "You've been away a long time, Esther." Then he roused himself. "No, it was I who went away to Egypt, of course—how foolish I'm getting. But you'd altered when I came back. Now you're the——" He paused and smiled in the old way. "You're just the little brown girl I loved."

"Almost loved," said Esther, also smiling. "If you'd loved me quite——" She broke off on the edge of a precipice. If he'd quite loved her where would she have been now?

"Well," he said, "almost as much as a man may who's got his notice to quit hidden about him. I've known for a long time that I could never be cured, though I didn't know the end was coming so soon. But I suppose you'd tell me I need not be ill—I need not die——"

"I won't try to tell you anything," said Esther in a low voice. "You wouldn't believe. I won't try to tell you."

"Ah! Well," he said, "I haven't brought you here to discuss the Hearers' creed. But you need not think you discovered the secret of the mind's dominion over matter. It's no new thing. Why, child, it's as old as suffering." He broke off, and started again. "I remember—I remember—when I was a little lad—why, Esther, there isn't one of them left now, and there were four of us at lessons together—I haven't thought of it for thirty years or more——'

Esther leaned forward and impulsively put her hand on his, it sounded so lonely.

"And then," he continued, "the lesson I liked best was about King Alfred, and his bad health, and his candles. I was a seedy, headachy little chap and I knew how fine it was—to burn his candles down to the fixed time, and stick at it, and never mind how ill he felt. He was the man I tried to copy. Every boy with imagination takes a hero; he was mine, because I could understand his greatness—he'd conquered the feeble body by the strength of a great mind."

"Oh—so have you—so have you," whispered Esther, and she laid her cheek on the hand she had taken, and the tears she so seldom shed for any one fell warm upon it.

Lavington's eyes were moist too, because he was very weak and near dying.

"My dear," he said, "I've never let any one be sorry for me before."

Then there was a little silence, and the nurse came to the door.

"Another minute," said Lavington. "Esther, I sent for you to tell you that I release your future husband from his promise. It was all right when he made it. But I don't believe in chaining the living to the dead."

"Ah, but I'll not go back on Paul's promise," cried Esther. "I'll keep it all the more because you're not there to——"

The sick man raised himself a little in his eagerness.

"Don't," he said. "Don't let me die feeling there's something I've tied you down to, when I'm powerless to watch the result. It's wrong—wrong—the dead mustn't bind the living. Oh, Esther, don't punish me by refusing to release me and yourselves. There are always two sides to a promise—binding the two—I must be free to die."

His eagerness was painfully unlike anything in him that Esther had ever known, and she felt again with a thrill of most intimate affection that he was letting her be sorry for him.

"It shall be as you wish," she said, then she began to sob quietly, because she could not help it.

He looked at her with something of the old expression, half mocking, half kind, and pulled himself together.

"My dear," he said, "that isn't very complimentary to Stallard, you know. You can marry him now whenever you like. You're not crying about that, surely?"

But Esther could not answer, and only pressed his hand as the nurse came resolutely up to the bedside to take her away.

"Bend over," he whispered. "Esther, you needn't be sorry now, you foolish little woman. Why, the last candle's nearly burnt. I'm going to measure time by the light eternal now, and read in the lesson-book where things are made plain. It's all right, dear."

So they parted, and Esther went downstairs with the nurse, who eyed her curiously as she dried her eyes and composed herself.

"I suppose Mr. Lavington has everything he can possibly require," Esther said, as she prepared to go.

"Oh, yes, certainly," replied the nurse in a distant tone. "I thought, Miss Moor, that you did not believe in illness or death or—or sorrow," and she fixed her light, hard eyes on Esther's tear-stained face.

Esther raised her head and the Burdock spirit flashed out.

"I do not believe in the *necessity* for it," she said with dignity. "But for those whom I love I still feel sympathy, and I trust I always may do. Sympathy is the visible sign of knowledge."

"Oh, indeed," said the nurse, opening the door. She was not to be sat upon by the Messenger or anybody else after three years' training in a London hospital. A trained nurse of her type would face Olympian Jove with a cold sense of her own equality, and a complacent forecast of the time when too much nectar should place him at her mercy.

Esther sat in the cab looking moodily out at the roadside. As she passed the little hill with the weather-bent tree on it and the smooth pasture land round, the thought

occurred to her that it would be a splendid spot on which to hold an open-air meeting of the Hearers. Not too far from Shelton station for the Lowport people and yet near enough to the surrounding villages. She must talk the matter over with Paul.

Then the old weary round of jealous thoughts began again. He was so tremendously interested in the Hearers' cause—was he as much interested in her, personally? What would he talk about to her if he were not always arranging the details of organization?

Yet he said that he did it all for her sake. It was not the life he wished for, or was best fitted for—he was swamping his career in hers.

Could a man do more than that?

Surely when they were married this ceaseless questioning would end.

Lavington's words rose clear out of the mist of pain in which she had heard them.

"You can marry Stallard whenever you like."

That was what she had to tell Paul when he came that evening, and the joy of it made her forget her sorrow about Lavington as well as those jealous thoughts.

Paul had got there before her, and the servants said he had gone for a little walk in the wood until she came back, so she turned from the door and followed him. Half-way down the leafy drive she heard the sound of voices, but when some dried wood crackled under her footsteps the sound ceased, and a moment later the little fair maidservant from Miss Burdock's came in sight.

"Have you seen Mr. Stallard," Esther asked, glancing

at the round, flushed face of the 'little girl waiting to be kissed,' whom Paul had noticed that Sunday.

"No—yes—he's just back o' them bushes," said the girl, hurrying past with a muttered remark about being late for supper.

A few yards farther on Esther found him.

"Oh, here you are; Aunt Burdock's little servant helped me to find you," she said.

"Oh! Well, how did you find Lavington?" asked Stallard.

"Bad," said Esther. She waited a moment. "Paul—he has withdrawn his promise. We can be married when we like."

There was a second pause—not long enough for Esther to begin to wonder, but still a pause. Then Stallard threw his arms about her.

"Darling, let's be married next month when there's the harvest moon. I've always sworn that my honeymoon should be a harvest moon—the finest in the year—nothing less should do honour to my love. But I never dreamed, sweetheart, that my love would be a leader of mankind."

Esther drew back and looked at him oddly. He couldn't forget that, even in such a moment. If she could only be sure——

"What is it, dear," he asked, with a quick thought of that unfortunate kiss upon the cliffs. "What are you thinking of? You don't doubt me, Esther?"

"No," she said. Then he took her in his arms again, and she felt sure—at least nearly quite sure—that it was just the *woman* he loved; the real self, not the Messenger.

VOICES

"Oh, you do love me, Paul?" she said, drawing her lips breathlessly away from his.

"I've loved you——" he looked about the woods for something to swear by. "I've loved you more than my hope of being remembered by future generations, Esther. I can't say more than that. I've been content to be remembered as the husband of the Messenger—to take a lower part in your greatness. No man can do more than that."

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was such a fresh morning, with a warm sun and the cool salt tang of the sea, that business men living at Shelton opened their newspapers in the railway carriage feeling it was really a fine thing, and worth living for, to sell corn and fish and seed and timber—a fact they sometimes doubted in less inspiring weather.

"First of September," said one man, as if that in itself were a joyful piece of news.

"Got your guns ready?" asked another, and they all laughed, though there was nothing at all to laugh at. "That suit of yours has a sporting cut, now I come to look at it," he continued, encouraged; and Astley, the owner of a very strictly "business" morning coat and grey trousers, thought what a witty fellow Brown was: that is one reason why working men are younger than working women—they can keep on laughing at any silly joke going to and from their work—they don't give everything out.

"Seen this paragraph about Stallard?" said the first speaker. "'Pears he's defending that chap who's owned up to misappropriating some funds belonging to the Lowport Town Council. Stallard tries to make out he's a hero bigger than Nelson or Wellington. What do you think, Astley?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Astley. "I suppose the man did show a good deal of moral courage."

"Moral fiddlesticks! Saw he was going to be found out," said Brown breezily. "I hate this new cult for making heroes of criminals—it's charity run mad, I call it. It's the newest pose, so of course Stallard's in for it. Do you see what he said in his speech? 'The voluntary acknowledgment of imposture is the last and highest test of moral strength?'"

"Heard him say it before—it's one of his tags," said Ned Moor from his corner behind a paper.

"Oh, sorry; forgot you were there. Of course, he's going to marry your sister. And you were a disciple of his, one time, weren't you?"

"Well—I'm not now," said Ned Moor.

The train was rushing into Lowport station by this, and the men gathered their papers together.

"He's a magnificent speaker, all the same," said Brown. "If he retires, as he seems likely to do, he'll be a loss to his party. I can't understand his doing it."

"Oh, he will help Miss Moor in her work," said the first speaker. "A man can't be a Member of Parliament and much else in these strenuous days, and there must be a lot of business arrangement connected with the Hearers' community—it's so jolly well organized."

"Will it last?" said a little man in a corner.

"Bound to," said Brown, with his hands on the carriage door. "Only creed in the world that's on an absolutely sound financial basis. *Pay* for what you get—if you don't pay you don't get. Well, so long!"

An hour or two later the "Lowport News" also made its way into the Pobsons' living-room, where it lay on the red tablecloth until Mr. Pobson came in from his rounds. Mrs. Pobson was far too interested in the churning to bother about the nation—that could take care of itself—the butter couldn't.

"Any news?" she said when she sat down at last.

"Earthquake in Japan—Barker's Sale's advertised—Oh, and Stallard's been speaking again," said Mr. Pobson. "Makes out if you've done wrong and owned up you're better and nobler than if you'd never done it. My! it's a rare fine speech. I never looked upon it i' that light before, but I must own I can see what he's driving at. Seems there's some sort o' subscription being got up for the feller's family—I'll send a guinea; danged if I don't!"

"Guineas must be a lot plentifuller with you than you make out they are when I want a new carpet," responded Mrs. Pobson. "I don't trust that Stallard—I never have—I never shall."

"Oh, I don't know that I've cottoned to him, as you might say," remarked Mr. Pobson, turning the flimsy sheets. "I wonder how much he believes of that nonsense of Esther's."

"Enough to get a fat living out of it," Mrs. Pobson darkly insinuated, "that's all. Well, I hope Esther'll get and keep the whip-hand of him, or else she'll have a bad time. Lucky thing he gave Nellie the go-by—she'd have been a miserable woman if he'd had her."

"Wonder she doesn't pick up another chap," said Mr.

Pobson. "She's a pretty lass and a nice 'un. She'd better ha' taken our Bill."

"Ay—she'll be getting left, as many a pretty one has done before her. Too much choice. If a girl never has but one she snaps it," said Mrs. Pobson.

"Well, Esther wouldn't have our Bill either," said Mr. Pobson.

Now it is a queer thing that Mrs. Pobson could forgive Nellie for refusing her son, but never Esther. Nellie had heaps of chances—but Esther! She ought to have gone down on her bended knees.

"Oh," said Mrs. Pobson, "she could see Bill didn't want her. I don't s'pose he ever gave her a real, fair chance. But they say she's just crazed about Stallard—worships the very ground he walks on."

"He has a taking way with the lasses," said Mr. Pobson with impartial justice, "and she is a plain 'un, you know."

"He wouldn't never ha' taken *me*," said Mrs. Pobson, unlocking the sideboard where the silver sugar-basin was kept.

"Bet he would," said Mr. Pobson, yawning and stretching. "You would have married that lawyer chap from Lowport, you know, when you were a lass, if he hadn't picked up a wife with money. All women's got at by a soft tongue—Eve was—every one of 'em has been since. It's natur'. Now, is that dinner ready?"

"Yes; I'm going to Lowport this afternoon to buy Esther's wedding present, so you may make haste with dinner. The wedding's three weeks on Thursday."

"They seem to have fixed it up very sudden after putting it off like that," said Mr. Pobson, sitting down to the table. "Hope it'll really come off this time, or what shall you do with the cream-jug? We've plenty."

"Oh, it's all right this time," said Mrs. Pobson. "I saw Miss Astley yesterday and she'd been to order her own dress for the wedding. I hear she's sort of engaged to Charlie Moor; and that he is coming home this autumn; but he won't be in time to see Esther married, and I think she might have waited."

"She won't look up to much in white satin," said Mr. Pobson philosophically.

"But I hear folks in London think she has a wonderful face," remarked Mrs. Pobson. "They say a great artist is going to paint her for next year's Academy, and he considers her the most fascinating subject he has ever had."

"Oh, *London!*" replied Mr. Pobson, with a depth of scorn that said in more than words, how they'd think anything in London.

"Wonder what Mrs. Moor really makes of it all?" said Mrs. Pobson after a time, while the apple dumpling was cooling.

"Dunno," said Mr. Pobson, drinking his beer. He was tired of abstract questions for that morning.

But if he hadn't been there would still have remained the same difficulty in knowing what Mrs. Moor made of it, because she really could make nothing. She only lived in those days in a sort of glow of wondering exaltation at her

daughter's success, which was beyond all reason. Of course many people will say that no woman could have such blind faith in a daughter's spiritual attainments so lately achieved, and so undramatical and simple. But then those people cannot have noticed the plain fact that nothing in the world is too wonderful for a mother to believe about her child.

And on this sunny September morning, when the pricking sense of winter coming and the warm repose of summer past made that a perfection of north-country weather, more charming while it lasts than any on the earth, Mrs. Moor also read the "Lowport News" after early dinner.

"Here's a long report of Paul's speech, Nellie," she said. "Have you seen it?"

"Yes," said Nellie without looking up from her work, but flushing a little at the inward knowledge that no printed word of Stallard's which she could get hold of ever went unread by her. She had everything she could find of his in a drawer upstairs and despised herself for her weakness. But that's always the way—there is always an unexpected, foolish weakness—that is neither a satisfaction nor a comfort—in the really strong-hearted.

"Have you read it, Jim?" pursued Mrs. Moor, turning to her husband.

"No—don't want to—Paul's a wind-bag," said Mr. Moor, who was manipulating the arm of a china shepherdess. "Now, I feel it a compliment that the Harringtons should have trusted me with this group; it is worth at least a hundred pounds."

Nellie folded her work and stood up.

"I'm off out for a walk now. Should I post your letter for Mary Astley, about her engagement to Charlie? Why—mother—you'll be getting rid of us all soon. All but me. I'm going to stick on."

Mr. Moor actually stopped his operations for a second to look after his daughter as she left the room.

"I'm glad Stallard didn't have her," he said.

Mrs. Moor jumped in her chair.

"Have her! You talk as if Nellie had asked him to!" cried the indignant mother. "Why—there's nobody Nellie couldn't have, though she never lifts her little finger."

"Oh, yes, she does. All nice girls do. But Nellie was silly enough to let Stallard see her doing it. However, I'm thankful it was unsuccessful."

Mrs. Moor rose and came near to her husband.

"Now, Jim, you've got to mind me for once, and not look through me as if I weren't there. What grounds have you for saying this about Nellie?"

"I heard the maids talking when I was out in the garden the other day—through the kitchen window—and that confirmed what I'd always an idea of."

"And you're ready to let Esther have a man you would refuse Nellie to?" exclaimed Mrs. Moor.

"Oh, I shouldn't have refused Nellie, only I think Esther has a much better chance of happiness with him, because she will—to a certain extent, I suppose—hold the purse strings."

"You think him unreliable—and a wind-bag," cried

Mrs. Moor, " and yet you'd really let either of your daughters marry him ! "

" Certainly," said Mr. Moor with unruffled calm. " If he weren't a wind-bag he'd be something else, you know. Every man has his imperfections."

Mrs. Moor's chest heaved and her eyes flashed.

" I often wonder if you're human, Jim," she said.

" I'm thankful to say I'm less so than I was," replied Mr. Moor. " It's a terrible handicap, Agnes, to be very human. Look how it wears you out."

" And if it does," sobbed Mrs. Moor, casting herself in vain against that slowly built indifference. " If it does—well, I'd rather a ten years of mine than a thousand years of yours."

" A cycle of Cathay. You're not original, my wife." But he stopped his work and put a hand on hers all the same. " You're all right as you are, Agnes."

Mrs. Moor flushed as if he had paid her a most beautiful compliment, but kept to her point.

" Then you seriously think Nellie cared for Paul ? "

" I do. But I seriously think you'll do more harm than you could ever dream of, if you allow any one to suspect your knowledge. Women make their lives out of their emotions, whatever else they do by the way—and you'll spoil the emotional lives of both your daughters if you don't keep your mouth shut."

" Well, I know how to do that," said Mrs. Moor, with the Burdock very plainly marked in her.

" So I am aware," said Mr. Moor, " or I should not have told you. Nellie's like you in that respect. Well, I think

I'll just take this into the other room. I shall have to leave it there, and I don't want it to be moved after the arm is once fixed."

Mrs. Moor watched him go towards the door.

"I suppose you'll go to the wedding, though it is to be from The Grey House and not from here?" she said. "You'll give Esther away? She wanted me to ask you."

"Oh, yes," he said. "I'll give her away with my blessing—that's all I have to give. If I were more—human—Agnes, I shouldn't like that, you know."

"Esther will soon be a rich woman. You need not let that trouble you," said Mrs. Moor.

"I don't," said her husband. "That's one of my many advantages"

An hour or two later Mrs. Moor drove over to The Grey House and had tea with Esther in the garden. Mary Astley was not there, for once, and Mrs. Moor was glad to have a little time alone with her daughter; but Esther would not settle down to a quiet chat, and kept starting up to look at a newly opened flower, or to drive the birds away from the cherry tree near at hand.

"Three weeks will soon be over," said Mrs. Moor at last. "Are you thoroughly happy and content, Esther?"

Esther turned her face away, because she could not bear any one to see the sudden radiance she knew was there.

"More than happy, mother," she said in a low voice.

But Mrs. Moor thought of Nellie, and remained troubled and uneasy.

"Did you like Paul when you first met him?" she said.

"Yes," said Esther, in a tone that left no excuse for further questioning; she did not want to talk about it all with any one who understood her so well, and hedged herself about with the reserve which she had shown ever since the beginning of the Message; ever since—in fact—she had had something to hide.

Mrs. Moor felt the rebuff and rose to go—there seemed nothing to stay for—Esther sufficed to herself and didn't want her any longer.

"Have you had your wedding dress fitted yet?" she said.

"No. The woman comes out from Lowport to-morrow. You might ask Nellie just to run over on her bicycle, if she will, at four o'clock."

"It's a lovely satin," replied Mrs. Moor. "Well, good-bye, dear."

There was a great deal else she had meant to say, but she went away without saying it, because Esther had guessed and warded it off.

The next day Nellie came over, and the gown was fitted with almost solemn ceremony by the dressmaker from Lowport in person, who felt this was an advertisement worth any amount of trouble. While Esther stood with the clear daylight falling on her vivid, dark face, against the cold satin and silver, Stallard was shown in the sitting-room.

Nellie bent to adjust the train as Stallard first saw his bride in her wedding gown, and Esther's eyes flamed,

seeking her lover's. The dressmaker fell back in a flutter of excitement, and nobody spoke a word.

"Good day, sir," said the dressmaker at last with an air of setting them at their ease. "I hope you like the lady's dress. We think it the most beautiful bridal gown we have ever turned out."

Stallard was frowning abstractedly as he looked at Esther; but the surprise in the woman's tone recalled him to a sense of what was fitting and he took his future bride's hand, which looked oddly brown against the satin, and kissed it in a way that made the dressmaker thrill, for the moment, with the wish that she had such a lover and was going to be married again in three weeks' time.

Nellie's face was very pale, like a winter flower, when she raised it from arranging the train; but she was smiling.

"Well, isn't it too lovely, Paul?" she cried gaily. "I've never seen such a beautiful gown."

"Lovely," agreed Paul, without looking at her. "But I think I'm not wanted at this business; I'll just have a smoke in the garden until you're ready, Esther."

Half an hour later Esther came towards him across the grass in her ordinary purple gown, believing, as every bride should, that she must at least have looked beautiful to her lover in her wedding dress.

"Well," she asked, "did you really like it?" and she felt quite certain of his answer.

He hesitated.

"I—you see—it makes you look ordinary, dear. Just the usual bride of the illustrated papers. And you're the

Messenger. Your wedding is, to many people, almost a sacred thing. You can't be got up like that in white and silver, with orange blossoms—it's altogether out of keeping."

Esther's look changed from one of vivid pleasure to blank, dull disappointment.

"Oh, Paul—can't I be just ordinary? Can't I forget I'm anything but a woman on my wedding day?"

"I'm afrad it won't do," he insisted.

"But I shall be so disappointed—the—the Esther part of me. I like that white satin gown so much, and I want to be just the same as ordinary brides. Besides—what else can I wear? What do you want me to wear?"

He looked at her critically.

"Dearest, you are so wonderful in your purple gowns, and I want you to be your most wonderful when you give yourself to me. You know what that artist said about them. That you seemed, in your purple gown and with your golden eyes, to be the impersonation of a Royal Message?"

"I don't want to be anything that day but your wife," persisted Esther. "I want to forget I am the Messenger."

"You can't do that," said Stallard solemnly. "You must, dearest, be that first, whatever you are afterwards."

"Even to you?" said Esther.

Stallard looked into her eyes with a meaning beyond his words that she could not fathom.

"To me, of course," he answered. "Well, are you going to have a purple wedding gown to please me, dear?

A bride should adorn herself to please her husband and not her female friends, you know."

"But if I'd been plain Esther Moor would you have wanted me to wear purple?" she asked.

"No, of course not," he replied thoughtlessly.

"Well then, I won't! I won't!" she said.

He lit another cigar.

"Oh, well, if you won't, of course——"

To his surprise the tears rolled down her cheeks and her lips trembled so much she could not speak for a minute. Then she said in a low tone:

"Ah! I knew. I always knew."

"What," he asked, trying to control his impatience.

"That you loved the Messenger better than you loved the girl Esther Moor."

"Rubbish! My darling, they're both one."

"They're not," said Esther. "That's just where you make the mistake."

He threw away his cigar and put his arms round her.

"Dearest heart," he whispered, "I've love enough for both."

Towards evening they went in, and then Stallard again began to talk about his future wife's career, in which he was so keenly interested.

"You still agree with my plan to hold a meeting on the night before our wedding?" he said. "I consider it a very fine idea. It's—well, it's what you always aim at—something higher than other people could do. It shows how deep and real your sense of your responsibility is—

when you take your last night before your wedding to say good-bye, as Esther Moor, to those who have followed you. The Hearers will be immensely touched and interested!"

"Yes, I dare say they will," Esther replied.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT was the day before Esther's wedding, and one of those still and perfect days which come at the end of September in the north, and seem so much more lovely because winter is just on the other side of the way.

The trains were very full that came into Shelton, for this was the early closing day in Lowport, and the last Thursday before the cheap trains were taken off for the winter. Hundreds of young men and women from shops and warehouses flocked about the cliffs and sands, a very well-behaved and decorous crowd on the whole, and nearly every one with a wish to improve—to rise to something better than they were—though their crude dreams took only the form of better food and clothes and houses, because that was the ideal constantly preached to them.

But deep down within a good many of them was a sense that even that wasn't enough—even that didn't last beyond the Black Doorway which most of them had seen opened by now at least once. It didn't even—witness the continued ill-health of the richest man in Lowport—it didn't even buy you health.

They did not reason it out, of course, but they had an inward unconscious desire for something that would bring them health, and happiness, and everlasting life.

But these young people had all read a lot of confusing literature—stories where the clever character never gave God and immortality more than the benefit of the doubt—"snappy" articles where gratitude to a Creator who had made things like *this* was discreetly ridiculed—lurid novelettes where suicide was made to look really rather heroic.

However, they did not think about all this—they were still far too healthy-minded for that, on a clear September day with the sea-salt in their faces and the sun shining. Only their unconscious state of confusion made them stop in front of Esther's placards with a feeling of curiosity. Was there anything in it ?

After a while, dozens of carts and bicycles began to gather from the neighbouring villages, where, upon blacksmiths' shops and blank walls had been placarded under Stallard's orders the following notice :—

> THE MESSENGER
>
> wishes to say Farewell to her Hearers on Thursday, September 27th, feeling that to them she owes the last evening of her unmarried life.
>
> The Meeting will take place in Mr. Barker's field on the Dunholme Road, at 9.30 p.m.
>
> A train will leave Shelton for Lowport at 11 p.m.
>
> All interested in the Message are cordially invited to be present, whether members of the community or not. No charge for admission."

VOICES

Nellie noticed the bills when she bicycled into Shelton about five o'clock, which she was obliged to do because Mrs. Moor's gloves for the wedding had split across the palm when they were tried on; and she encountered Astley coming up from the station just as she emerged from the draper's shop. He looked worn and bothered.

"You're not going to this thing to-night?" he said.

"Of course I am," she answered.

"There's going to be a tremendous crowd—it'll be no fit place for you," he answered. "Is your mother going with you?"

"No. Esther wants her to go to tea at Mrs. Pobson's and to come on afterwards in their trap to fetch me," said Nellie, as she jumped on her bicycle. "Hope it'll be weather like this for the wedding to-morrow. Good-bye."

Astley walked on towards the sea, and sat down on a chair on the sea-wall. Every other seat was filled; he could see a group of people from Masterby eagerly talking together, village politicians of the new, nervous type.

"You going to this meeting to-night?" asked one.

"Garn—what d'ye take me for?" responded the friend. "I don't believe in none o' their blooming nonsense. The Message is all humbug."

"Look here," said a little white-faced woman, "don't you talk like that, or you'll be getting caught. Do you know what happened to Jem Travers?"

"No!" cried the interested group.

"Well," said the woman solemnly, believing every word she spoke to the bottom of her heart, but enjoying the sense of being able to thrill,—"Well, Jem Travers talked

a lot against the Message; wrote a long piece to the 'Shelton Times' calling it blasphemous humbug." She paused dramatically, and lowered her voice. "Next week he fell off a ladder and broke his leg, and his pigs got swine fever the month after. What do you make of that?"

"Nowt," said the young man. "It's just chance."

But the whole group felt uncomfortable. It was as if the old superstitions of witchcraft and the evil eye had swept in a sort of backwash over their minds.

The young man thought of a cow he had that was ailing —he'd better be on the right side—it could do no harm.

A hundred years ago he'd have laid a shilling on the threshold of the Wise Woman, or a basket of fresh butter and eggs, now he did it more cheaply by just saying casually:

"Well, I may as well hear what the Message is like. You get hold of a wrong tale sometimes when you don't hear for yourself."

Thus curiosity, superstition, and a vague desire to find perfection, combined to draw numbers of people in the pleasant evening up the Dunholme Road to that field with the little hill in it, which Esther had seen with an odd stirring of the senses so long ago.

She had thought as she passed on that cold winter's evening in the moonlight, how splendid to stand on such a night with the wind-bent tree behind her and the moonlight above her, and a crowd of hushed listeners on the level grass below. She'd seen it all, then, as if with the physical eye, and it was to that moment of power she had unconsciously been climbing ever since.

To stand there alone, swaying by her own personality the great mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers.

She'd *felt* herself do it!

And now when the time came to choose a place for this great farewell meeting before her marriage, she chose to have it in the open air, and in this place. For one thing there was no room nearly large enough in Shelton, and for another she had always known the splendid capabilities of this wide grassy space with the rounded barrow on it. She had thought as a little girl coming home from Shelton on moonlight nights that St. Augustine must have preached on just such a spot when he came to convert England.

Now, to-night, she drove from The Grey House in absolute silence, though Mary Astley and Nellie were with her. She closed her eyes and saw the field and the little hill just as she had done when she first thought, "How splendid to stand there!"

The moon was only rising when they started, but it grew clearer until it shone, a most glorious harvest-moon, above the stooks of corn still in the fields. A glory of ripe fruit, and gathered corn, and the year's fullness seemed to flood the quiet country through which they drove. But Esther's face was cold and colourless, not in the least like that of a woman who loved and who was to be married in the morning. It was rather the face, half keen, half visionary of the true adventurer, who, having gained nearly everything, is ready to risk it all at the beckoning of some further small desire.

Just as a Burdock of the old whaling days had let his good ship well filled with blubber get fixed in the ice

floes while he sought for mammoth ivory he never found, so Esther looked ready that night to risk any fat, pleasant certainty for the prize of her imagination.

Nellie became uneasy at last.

"Esther, old girl, are you sure this isn't going to be too much for you? You never ought to have undertaken it just the night before your wedding," she said anxiously.

Mary looked at Nellie with dilated, exultant eyes.

"You don't understand," she said. "Esther has a great work to do to-night—she must not spend her powers as another girl might, in chatting about her wedding."

"Well," said Nellie, not without sharpness, "you can say what you like, Mary, but Esther looks pale and overdone."

Esther roused herself.

"Oh, it's the moonlight, Nellie. But I do want to keep quiet."

When they got to the field there was the curious hum of a waiting multitude, and some boys and girls shrieked and laughed on the outskirts of the crowd. As Stallard walked with Esther up to the little hill on which she was going to stand to give her address, he was a bridegroom whom any girl might envy. His face had never looked more noble and free-spirited, his natural fine carriage had never appeared more dignified and commanding.

"What a Lohengrin!" whispered a superior lady from Lowport.

He led Esther up to her place in front of the wind-twisted tree, and as they stood together with the moonlight on them, the spirit of romance which is so gloriously

much nearer than we think, caught hold of that crowd of people; so that they hurrahed, and shouted "Long life and happiness," until, really, the world seemed full of it. Half the women had tears in their eyes, feeling as if they, too, were to be married to-morrow morning to the sort of man they'd dreamed of when they were seventeen.

Then Stallard kissed Esther's hand, and left her; and she began to speak amid the humming noise of a crowd out of doors.

"I am here to-night," she said, and with her first words a little silence grew, because the crowd was already emotional and felt something unusual in her voice. "I am here to-night," she repeated, rather breathlessly, "to thank you. It is—my last night—and I wanted to tell you how I have treasured the high place you gave me. I was poor—of no account—and you have given me honour and power and glory."

She paused, looking round at them all with the moonlight most strong on her strange, pale face. "That's—at any rate—something to have lived for. If—if I died to-night, I've *done* something."

"Thought you were going to live for ever!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

"Hush! Hush!" cried the great majority.

"The man's right. I did not believe in the necessity for death—I believed in myself—I believed in the Message. I now believe in neither."

"A—ah," came the odd roar of a suddenly angry crowd.

"The Voices were a delusion. The Message a jumble

of memory and imagination. The whole creed is one hysterical obsession."

Esther paused, she had forced out the bald, plain words in the only way they would come to her, though she could scarcely be heard for the clamour of the excited people.

A woman ran up the little hill and grabbed her by the arm.

"Then—then you've been deceiving us, since you found out," she gasped.

"Yes," said Esther, at bay.

"Take that!" cried the woman, striking out at her. "Oh, when I'd hoped our poor Janie would walk again—after all these years—and now! Oh, you wicked woman!"

She fell to weeping bitterly, and Stallard came up, standing once more by his chosen wife.

She looked up at him, forgetting all the rest, her face one flaming question. A moment she gazed into his set, angry face, then turned away like somebody broken. Her adventurous spirit had failed at last.

"Send them away," she said, creeping down the far side of the little hill away from the people.

But Stallard made no movement to do so; he simply stood where she left him, staring out with still sullen face across the turbulent crowd.

Two or three men had pushed through already to the far side where Esther stood and were talking in rough, threatening tones to her, and Nellie and Mary were parted from her by a swaying mass of excited humanity.

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"Witch! Witch!"

Until the whole field i
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"They ducked the Dan
time," shouted the lad, ela

"Danwick witch! Duck
the lads, in for any amount

They were already surgin
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to approach her or to sooth
done.

"Come on, lass," said a
"thou'rt bound for Danwic
kicking."

He staggered back as a blo
and squared up to fight; the

"Mr. Astley!"

"Get off home," said As
your berth for this, you dr
come with me."

He dragged

Lowport people and Shelton people alike. You've known my father and grandfather before me. Have you ever known us stand up for a mean or unrighteous cause ? "

" No," cried one or two near, and the rest took up the cry as an excited gathering always will.

" Then you'll listen to me when I tell you that Miss Moor has done the bravest action of her life. A thing I couldn't have done ! You couldn't ! She's given up everything of her own free will. Can't you see that ? "

" Yes. No. She took us in finely first." Such were the answers shot out from one place and another.

" And," continued Astley, " all she asks is to be allowed to go in peace."

A rustic Hearer stepped forward.

" We mun hev a word or two with her first, Mister ! "

But his words were drowned in another blast of hooting, cat-calls, and laughter from behind.

Astley felt desperate, then he heard the scream of an engine afar off, and it gave him his chance.

" There's the Lowport train coming in," he shouted. " It'll be going out in a quarter of an hour, and if you want to catch it you must go at once. Miss Moor will discuss this with you on some future occasion."

A shop-walker who " lived in " held his watch up to the moonlight, gasped a hurried remark to his neighbour, and started to elbow his way out of the crowd. In a moment the stream of trippers had set in the direction of the gate, but the rural contingent still remained to do battle with.

" Mr. Barker ! " Astley shouted to the owner of the field, who had come up. " Can't you do anything ? "

"Anything you like."

"Twenty pounds?" said

steadied at once by the pros

"Yes."

"Done," said Mr. Barker.

Then he got up on the hill

"This is my field. I let

meeting's over. Now get ou

land. You're not poor, silly

you're ruining my grass. N

off with you!"

"We want to speak to Miss

Esther was about to repl

"Don't speak. They'll start

Aloud he cried out: "Miss I

speak to no one. In commo

to disperse."

There was the intermittent

with the bitter murmur of du

like waves breaking sharply

But at last, as there was n

Mary had never spoken since Esther said those words: "The Voices are a delusion." She continued to sob pitifully, helplessly, as if she were beyond all hope, until Esther could bear it no longer.

"Mary," she said, in a voice they none of them could recognize, "you've got Charlie left."

Then the pitiful sobbing eased a little; but Nellie knew how much more agony there was in Esther's hard voice than in Mary's sobs, and she threw her arms round her sister.

"Dear old girl, dear old girl," she said, weeping; she could not say anything more.

But Esther pulled herself away.

"Leave me alone until I have spoken to Paul," she said. "You can do what you like to me then."

"I'll fetch him," said Astley.

So they three went across the field to Stallard, leaving Esther alone; and as they went Nellie slipped her hand in Astley's arm and whispered brokenly:

"Stephen—Oh, I can't thank you——"

But she did, as she looked at him in the moonlight with eyes that began to see how dear he was; and then they came up with Stallard.

"Paul," Nellie said, "Esther wants to speak to you at once."

She could not keep the scorn out of her voice, and he winced at it.

"You're blaming *me?*" he said. "That's just like a woman." And he went across the field to where Esther stood alone, waiting for him.

... he said again

"Paul," she said, with t
who will do anything to br
I'm very, very sorry."

"What did you do it for

"Oh, you'll never under
of the Messenger. I wante
were married that it was th
loved best, not the Messeng
fool, I see it now, to risk all

"You were," said Stallard

"But, Paul—you'd always
of moral strength to own our

There was a dead silence, b
her parched lips before she c

"You'll—you'll want our
morrow, I expect?" she said

He laughed.

"Did you really suppose
myself with a woman that'
are?"

Her eyes were set and f

"But you believed in them once?" she flashed out, suddenly regaining courage.

"I never believed in them," he answered. "I saw through your imposture, and I thought you knew I did. I thought you, you see, so infinitely cleverer than you really are, that I meant to marry you. I thought it was wonderful of you to keep up the farce even with me."

"There was a time when I was sincere," cried Esther. "I began by imposture and I ended by it, but for a time I believed absolutely in the Voices."

"That makes no difference," said Stallard. "You've been a fool. You've thrown up everything for nothing, and you've most probably ruined me into the bargain. But if I'm done for, I'll be done for alone. I won't be saddled with a woman who's made me look like a fool to all the world—a laughing-stock."

He lashed out, careless of her pain in his frenzy of rage and mortification.

"Have you never cared at all for me?" she cried. "You couldn't speak to me like this if you had even cared a little, Paul?"

"No," he said, pausing for words that should wound most surely this woman who had taken riches and honour and ease away from him for no tangible reason. "No. I've never loved you."

Esther gazed at him with a look of such desperate entreaty, and love, and agony that a much worse man than Stallard might have been moved by it to take a woman he wanted to get rid of.

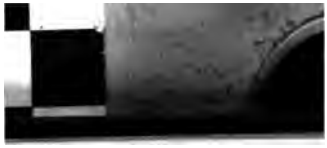
without a cry or any otl
across the deserted field, all l
and desolate with bits of pa
from the sea.

He walked quickly and w
but she did not seem to se
There was a sound of a ca
somebody came across the f
not see them or hear them.

Then a voice cried : " Estl
and she stood quite still, swa

The steps came hurrying n
out her hands blindly.

" Mother ! "



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or not, Craven was her lover) liv
her father on that throne, but yet
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